Plotinus in Dialogue with the Gnostics

JEAN-MARC NARBONNE

STUDIES IN PLATONISM, NEOPLATONISM, AND THE PLATONIC TRADITION

BRILL

Plotinus in Dialogue with the Gnostics

Ancient Mediterranean and Medieval Texts and Contexts

Editors

Robert M. Berchman

Jacob Neusner

Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic Tradition

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VOLUME 11

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By

Jean-Marc Narbonne

BRILL

LEIDEN • BOSTON
2011

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Narbonne, Jean-Marc, 1957-
Plotinus in dialogue with the Gnostics / by Jean-Marc Narbonne.
p. cm. – (Ancient Mediterranean and medieval texts and contexts. Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic tradition ; v. 11)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-90-04-20326-6 (hardback : alk. paper)
1. Plotinus. Enneads. 2. Gnosticism. I. Title. II. Series.

B693.E63N37 2011
186'.4–dc22

2011005129

ISSN 1871-188X
ISBN 978 90 04 20326 6

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To the memory of Jean Pépin,
in tribute to Pierre Aubenque and Werner Beierwaltes.

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NOTE ON PUBLICATIONS

Of the studies that follow, some are original, while others, which have previously been published in English, French or Spanish in various periodicals, are reworked. Here are the past publication details of each.

Study One "The Controversy over the Generation of Matter: the Riddle Resolved?". First published under the title "La controverse à propos de la génération de la matière chez Plotin: l'énigme résolue?", in *Quaestio*, 7 (2007), *La Materia*, Constantino Esposito and Pasquale Porro (Eds), Turnhout/Bari, Brepols, pp. 123–164.

Study Two "The Riddle of the Partly Undescended Soul in Plotinus: the Gnostic/Hermetic Lead of the ὁμοούσιος". First published under the title: "L'énigme de la non-descente partielle de l'âme chez Plotin: la piste gnostique/hermétique de l'ΟΜΟΟΥΣΙΟΣ", in *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 64 (2008), pp. 691–708.

Study Three "A Doctrinal Evolution in Plotinus? The Weakness of the Soul in its relation to Evil". First published under the same title in *Dionysios*, 25 (2007), pp. 77–92.

Study Four Previously unpublished.

Study Five "A New Type of Causality: Plotinian Contemplative Demiurgy". First published under the title "Un Nuevo tipo de causalidad: la demiurgia contemplative plotiniana", in *Revista Latinoamericana de Filosofía* (Buenos Aires 2010), pp. 307–322.

Study Six Previously unpublished.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The following studies have greatly benefited from the intellectual milieu in which they were written, that is the *Institut d'études anciennes* at Université Laval, which harbours, among others, the team of researchers currently working on the French edition of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts, whence stems the essence of our new-found knowledge of Gnosticism. I particularly recall the numerous exchanges that I have enjoyed with Claude Lafleur, Louis Painchaud, and Anne Pasquier. I have also greatly profited from the numerous discussions that I have had with various members of the research team which I head at Université Laval on the writing of Plotinus, such as Martin Achard, Andréi Cornea, Kevin Corrigan, Lorenzo Ferroni, Mauricio Marsola and John Turner, as well as with the members of the Nordic Nag Hammadi and Gnosticism Network (NNGN), especially Zeke Mazur and Tuomas Rasimus.

Many of my students have been both an aid and a precious intellectual stimulation, as is the case for, among others, Simon Fortier, Christophe Gagnon-Lavoie, Philippe Groppi, François Lortie, Brian Monast and Vincent Pelletier.

I owe a special thanks to Paul-Hubert Poirier, who both read and commented in detail upon many of the studies here assembled. Alain-Philippe Segonds also aided me in more ways than can easily be expressed.

Finally, for the present English translation of these texts, I thank Simon Fortier and Brian Monast for their patient and meticulous work.

Jean-Marc Narbonne,
April, 2010

INTRODUCTION

The studies here proposed, while each covering a different theme, share nonetheless a common point which is absolutely central to all: they come to light when seen from a perspective which, as Treatise 33 reveals, stems from an anti-Gnostic position. Ever since R. Harder's famous article,[1] it has been the rule to think that what could be called "the Gnostic *file*" or the "Gnostic *disagreement*" actually occupied a clearly delimited space in the Plotinian corpus: treatises 30 to 33, which have since been commonly referred to as *die Großscrhift*,[2] as if the controversy with the Gnostics, save for the odd marginal scuffle, was simply the mark of a single period, among other comparable periods, staked out over Plotinus' intellectual career.

The point of view put forth in the following pages—grounded, as we will see, on a set of precise textual clues—differs greatly from this common perspective. It assumes, on one hand, that Plotinus was familiar with Gnostic doctrines from very early on, even in Alexandria, where these were already flourishing,[3] and certainly later in Rome, from the very first

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[1] "Eine neue Schrift Plotins", *Hermes*, 71 (1936), pp. 1–10.

[2] D. Roloff, *Die Großschrift* III 8-V 8-V 5-II 9, Berlin, Gruyter, 1970.

[3] According to K. Rudolph (*Gnosis. The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, R. McLachlan Wilson [transl.], San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1983), the doctrine reached Alexandria near the beginning of the second century, and Rome around 130, the two cities quickly becoming important centres of Gnosticism, with towering figures such as Basilides, Marcion and Valentine (cf. p. 308 ff.). G. Fowden (*The Egyptian Hermes*, Cambridge, Cambridge U. Press, 1986), also notes that several Gnostic treatises mentioned by Prophyry were circulating in the Plotinian circle (*Vit. Pl.* 16), specifically the *Zoroaster*, *Zostrianus*, *Nicotheus*, *Allogenes* and *Messus*, which "are known to have circulated amongst the Egyptian gnostics […]." (p. 202). P. Claude had reached earlier the same conclusion (*Les trois stèles de Seth. Hymne gnostique à la triade* [*NH* VII 5], Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, section Textes, #8, Québec, PUL, 1983), insisting on the close affinities between Gnostic argumentation and Plotinus' and noting as well: that "the Alexandrian centre of the time corresponded to the description Clement of Alexandria († approx. 215) left us of it: the second largest city of the Empire, after Rome, Alexandria was dominated by different forms of Gnosticisms (or Gnosis) and as well by the hermetist circles. Perhaps it is in this Alexandrian milieu that we should seek the common source of both Plotinian and Sethian thought, if we identify the disappointing celebrities Porphyry refers to with the Gnostic masters of the day." (p. 31, translated) These celebri-

moments after he made it the home of his teaching. It assumes, on the other hand, ongoing discussions of some nature with his "Gnostic"—yet Platonizing—friends; discussions which would have been subject, naturally, to the usual high points and low points, and which would have found themselves woven in with other important theoretical debates, but which Plotinus nonetheless never lost sight of. This is why we have come to substitute, for the idea of a *Großscrhift*, that of a *Großzyklus*, that is, a more subtle concept comprising a set of treatises from the mid-point of Plotinus' literary career—covering the years 263 to 268, where Porphyry was by his side—and during which the response to Gnosticism is slowly orchestrated, with Treatise 33, *Against the Gnostics*, representing, of course, the culmination of the entire enterprise. But the *greater cycle* has decisive roots in Plotinus' initial writing period—for which we will examine proofs, to be found in treatises 2, 6 and 8, for example—, and will extend on the other hand into the years that follow Porphyry's departure, in his treatises 47 and 48, on providence, for example, and especially in Treatise 51, on the source of evils. It is surprising that the *Großscrhift* hypothesis, which Harder himself devised, and of which Theiler had long since emphasized the fragility,[4] has nonetheless been widely accepted to this day. This is all the more surprising, given Porphyry's categorical statement, from chapter 16 of the *Vita Plotini*, with which Harder's suggestion must be confronted. According to Porphyry, Plotinus wrote, not one *long* treatise, but one designedly aimed against the Gnostics, Treatise 33, which he describes thusly: "Plotinus, writes Porphyry, hence often attacked their position in his lectures, and wrote the treatise to which we have given the title *Against the Gnostics*; […]."[5] Beyond this unequivocal

ties who disappointed Plotinus are indeed those referred to in the *Vita Plotini*: "In his twenty-eighth year he felt the impulse to study philosophy and was recommended to the teachers in Alexandria who then had the highest reputation [εὐδοκιμοῦσι]; but he came away from their lectures […] depressed and full of sadness […]." (*Porphyry on the Life of Plotinus and the Order of his Books* [henceforth *Vit. Pl.*], 3, 3–9, in Plotinus, *Enneads* [7 vol.], A.H. Armstrong [transl.], vol. I, London/Cambridge Mass., W. Heineman/Harvard U. Press, 1966). Were these Gnostics? We can presume as much, at least for some of them.

[4] Cf. *Plotins Schriften*, Band III b, Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 1964, where the series of four treatises is presented as an *anti-Gnostic cycle*, Theiler carefully specifying that "the parts of the cycle are not elements of a systematic construction." (p. 414, translated)

[5] *Vit. Pl.*, *op. cit.* (note 3), 16, 9–11. Regarding the problem of the role Porphyry might have played with respect to the determination of the titling of Plotinian treatises, which seems much less important than is commonly thought, see the update in *Plotin. Écrits*, vol. I, 1, Introduction (Paris, Belles Lettres [Budé], [forthcoming]).

declaration from Plotinus' editor, a declaration which we have no particular reason to doubt, A.M. Wolters has identified several incoherencies within Harder's attempted reconstitution, such as the idea, for example, that the introduction of this pseudo treatise would extend inordinately to eight of the eleven chapters of Treatise 30, or that 15 of the 18 chapters of Treatise 33 would in fact be some kind of appendix to the whole![6] This commentator has noted, moreover, the partly polemical nature of Harder's essay, which was an attempt to reaffirm the validity of the chronology of the Plotinian works as communicated to us by Porphyry, which was itself questioned shortly before by F. Heinemann, according to whom treatises 32–33 would have in reality preceded treatises 30–31.[7] Hence, for example, Harder's argument to the effect that the last sentence in 31 would represent an organic link with 32. But, pressed by the desire to strengthen his thesis, Harder went further and propsed, without the least bit of proof, that the long treatise was originally on one unique *roll*, the four treatises corresponding in fact to four *scissor cuts*, performed by Porphyry himself (!) on the rolls, dictated by the four oral lessons set down at the start: "The sum, as Harder concludes, is *one* presentation, and the four books correspond to *four hours of teaching*."[8] However, nothing in the direct or indirect testimonies can lend any credence to this fable of a Porphyry working *scissors in hand* and it took, it seems, M. Tardieu's decisive paper to finally demolish this thesis, by showing that what Porphyry was editing, in any case, was a *codex*. I will quote on this point Tardieu's conclusion: "Chapters 25 and 26 of *The Life of Plotinus* leave no doubt about this issue: the *Enneads*' 54 treatises form a 'σωμάτια' (*Vit. Pl.* 26, 3), that is to say, three hefty volumes (in the current sense of the word) each made up of several notebooks (*codices*) tied together."[9] Moreover, this publication in the form of codices is not without bearing some significance for us with respect to the subject of our own inquiry, since, as Tardieu explains again, this new form of editing set Plotinus on an equal footing with his rivals: "Plotinus' text was [thus]

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[6] A.M. Wolters, "Notes on the Structure of *Enneads II, 9*", in *Life is Religion. Essays in Honor of H. Evan Runner*, H.V. Goot (Ed.), St Catharines (Ontario), Paideia, 1981, pp. 83–96.

[7] F. Heinemann, *Plotin. Forschungen über die plotinische Frage, Plotins Entwicklung und sein System*, Amsterdam/Leipzig, Felix Meiner, 1921; reprint: Aalen, Scientia Verlag, 1973, pp. 167–169.

[8] Cf. art. cit. (note 1), p. 9: "Dann ist das Ganze *ein* Vortrag, und die vier Bücher sind vier *Vortragsstunden* […]."

[9] M. Tardieu, "Les gnostiques dans la *Vie de Plotin*. Analyse du chapitre 16", in *Porphyre. La vie de Plotin*, J. Pépin (Ed.), Paris, Vrin, 1992, p. 524, translated.

raised to the rank of sacred writing: its material aspects made it blend in with Christian bibles and Gnostic writings."[10]

Furthermore, there are good reasons for insisting, as was done recently,[11] on the radical difference of tone existing between Treatise 33 and the rest of the so-called Long Treatise. Indeed, the Πρὸς τοὺς γνωστικούς treatise presents to us an extremely incensed and incisive Plotinus, whose attacks, directed at his former friends, are bitter and confrontational. His adversaries see themselves rebuffed for every one of their arguments, and accused of sailing from one absurdity to another, an approach which clashes with the genial words of treatises 30 to 32, and of which only one other example can be found in the Plotinian corpus, this being Treatise 39, *On Free Will and the Will of the One*, the relation of which to the anti-Gnostic program of 33 will be established later (Study 6). Plotinus, then, is resolved to confront, once and for all, people with regards to whom—as he knows very well and confesses—"no further progress towards convincing them" (33 [II 9], 10, 9) could be achieved,[12] that is, individuals who, being essentially bearers of a revealed truth, remain deaf to philosophical argumentation; in short, dogmatists (whom Plotinus also judges to be arrogant). Even by its style, then, Treatise 33 demonstrates its autonomy in relation to treatises 30, 31 and 32. At the other end of the series, there is Treatise 30, regarding which Wolters has already stated how it stands on its own, and how it forms, by itself, "a well-rounded literary whole."[13] We may conclude, therefore, that the artificiality of Harder's interpretation shows through no matter where we look.[14]

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[10] *Ibid*., p. 525, translated.

[11] P. Athanassiadi, *La lutte pour l'orthodoxie dans le platonisme tardif de Numénius à Damascius*, Paris, Belles Lettres, 2006, pp. 123–127.

[12] *Enneads*, *op. cit*. (note 3). All quotes from Plotinus are taken from Armstrong's translation, with occasional modifications. All emphases are mine.

[13] Art. cit., (note 6), p. 87.

[14] From the sole fact that the last chapter of 33 evokes the phenomenon of contemplation, we cannot draw the conclusion, based on the hypothesis of a circular construction (*Ring*-Komposition), that this treatise ties in with the start of Treatise 30, as if there was a continuation from one to the other, which is what C. Guerra was only recently defending ("Porfirio editore di Plotino e la 'paideia antignostica'", *Patavium* 8, Fasc. 15, 2000, pp. 111–137), all the while recognizing that the work is in fact an *addition* to the other three treatises. A yet stranger point of view is to be found in T.G. Sinnige's *Six lectures on Plotinus and Gnosticism* (Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic, 1999), where the author, while apparently maintaining the existence of the long treatise, thinks however that it does not always pertain to the Gnosis: "The greater part of the long treatise is a quiet and well-balanced exposition of Plotinus' metaphysical theory, and not a discussion of Gnostic problems." (p. 65)

This is, as one could put it, a case of being unable to see the forest for the trees. It was taken for granted that the Gnostics went from the status of friends to that of enemies, taken for granted that their opposition represented a challenge for Plotinus, and, precisely because of this, the idea grew that Plotinus wrote *one long treatise* to settle their disagreement once and for all and then *moved on*. Hence, there was no longer any need for the painstaking work of re-establishing the intrinsic ties linking the discussion in 33—or even in the series from 30 to 33—to the rest of the corpus.[15] Hence, there were no longer any motives for screening the first texts in the hope of finding there the bases or, at the very least, the seeds of the matter of Treatise 33,[16] and, in the late works, a revival of the debates which were raging earlier between 263 and 268. But the prospect of an *uninterrupted discussion* of Plotinus with the Gnostics, carried on throughout all his writings and pursued over the whole of his career constitutes a definitive break from this interpretative model. To be sure, opposing Gnosticism is not Plotinus' only preoccupation, as he regularly takes issue with Aristoteleanism, Stoicism and Epicureanism, but the corpus as a whole bear its mark. The polemic with the Gnostics represents a principal theme, never entirely left to rest. In this sense, we might say that Plotinus never did *move on*, and the reason for this is quite simple: he was ceaselessly confronted by Sethian interpreters who, right alongside of him, were reading and commenting upon the

[15] With the exception of H.-C. Puech's precious indications in his pioneering study "Plotin et les Gnostiques" (in *Les Sources de Plotin*: *dix exposés et discussions*, "Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique" coll., vol. V, E.R. Dodds *et al.* (Eds), Vandœuvres-Geneva, Fondation Hardt, 1960, p. 183), which once drew attention, aside from the so-called long treatise, on the Gnostic content of several other texts: 6 (IV 8), 4 and 8; 13 (III 9), 6; 28 (IV 4), 10 and 12; 38 (VI 7) (*the entire treatise?*); 40 (II 1), 4; 45 (III 7) 6 and 13; 47 (III 2), 1, 3, 7 and 12; 49 (V 3), 12; 51 (I 8) (*the entire treatise?*); 52 (II 3), 16.

[16] Tardieu's point of view needs to be corrected on this matter ("Recherches sur la formation de l'Apocalypse de Zostrien et les sources de Marius Victorinus", *Res Orientales*, IX (1996), p. 112), which, curiously, dates from 263 "the arrival of the Gnostics in Plotinus' school", to which we must prefer, it seems to us, the hypothesis put forth by H.-C. Puech, who wrote: "Plotinus (II, 9, 10) treats the Gnostics as 'friends' […]. Φίλοι, based on the Pythagoreans' usages, seemed to indicate that he considered them as belonging to the same group as he and his disciples, to the community of sectarians from the 'mysteries of Plato'. He includes them, calling them thus, in the circle, the quasi religious fraternity of Platonist […]. His 'Friends', however, were already converted to the Gnosis before his arrival in Rome. They formed already, and likely did not cease to form, a distinct group […]. It is certain, in any case, that, when, in 244, Plotinus arrives in Rome and begins teaching his lessons, he finds, amongst his listeners—listeners who were also interlocutors—a certain number who were already committed to Gnostic theories" ("Plotin et les Gnostiques", art. cit. [note 15], pp. 182–183, translated).

very same texts as him, contemplatives who were spreading a doctrine of salvation that competed with his own and who shared with him several presuppositions, even if certain particular themes made them radical opponents. Plotinus shows himself to be very conscious of this direct competition in his interpretation of Plato, stating that: "in general they [the Gnostics] falsify Plato's account of the manner of the making, and a great deal else, and degrade the great man's teachings […]" (33 [II 9], 6, 24–26).

Now, the prospect of an *ongoing discussion* with the Gnostics bears an additional virtue, that of allowing for a truly dynamic understanding of the Plotinian corpus. Here, another tenacious myth of Plotinian literature awaits: the idea that Plotinus had *mastered* already, before his arrival in Rome, all the key aspects of his system, which subsequently did not undergo any significant changes.[17] Purely contingent *shifts of emphasis* were all that the corpus as a whole showed any traces of.[18] This judgment is in line along with that of Bréhier, according to whom, "given the law that governs the [literary] genre he has opted for, Plotinus ignores the art of systematically developing a doctrine."[19] Plotinus, therefore, according to this interpretation, changes his emphasis, as one might *arbitrarily change themes from one treatise to another*, and seems incapable of extending the course of his thought over several treatises. However, thanks to the concept of the *Großzyklus*, we now stand corrected on this point, as it restores a plotline to Plotinus' argumentation as a whole. According to this concept, treatises 27–29, as a group, are closely linked to the series 30–33, and 34 itself takes up again a substantial development from 32 (V 5), 4–5. The affinity between 38 and 33 has been known since at least Heinemann, and Harder himself built on it.[20] The famous τολμηρὸς λόγος from 39 (VI 8) most likely stems from the

[17] Cf. notably H.-R. Schwyzer, quite typical in this regard, for whom the whole system of Plotinus had already attained completion *before being given a written form* ("*vor der schriftlichen Fixierung*"), and cannot therefore have undergone any ulterior internal transformation (*Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Band 21, Munich, Drukenmüller, 1951, coll. 548).

[18] So it was for Blumenthal, in *Plotinus' Psychology. His Doctrine of the Embodied Soul*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1971, p. 4.

[19] *Plotin. Ennéades*, Paris, Belles Lettres (Budé), 1924, p. xxx, translated.

[20] Art. cit. (note 1), p, 7–8: "auch sie [38] hängt gedanklich eng mit unserer Gruppe [30–33] zusammen, steht aber literarisch auf sich selber. Sie stellt sich mir dar als eine Art von Retraktation, eine erneute Behandlung des Gegenstandes von 30–33, und zwar diesmal in anderm Stil und mit andern Methoden: nach der Vortragsreihe die Lehrschrift."

Gnostic debate,[21] as do 47 and 48 as well. We will see shortly how Treatise 51 must be considered as a conclusion of sorts to the criticism of Gnosticism developed more specifically in 33 (II 9), 10–12. Looking into this more closely, we will see that Harder's essay, in line with what Heinemann had already uncovered, contained itself a part of the remedy against the extravagant hypothesis of the 'Long treatise', since Harder already foresaw the existence of conceptual connections (*Gedanken*zusammenhänge) in the entire set of treatises extending from 27 to 38.[22] We will later see (Study 2) that treatises 2, 6 and 8, where the famous theme of the *partial non descent* of the soul is already exposed, and that of the kinship *of souls*—already touched upon—, are polemical weapons built to counter the Gnostics and that treatises 9 to 11, where for the first time, Plotinus lays the grounds for the interpretation of Plato's *Parmenides* and develops his theory of the three natures, and then that of the perfectly transcending One, should in all probability be read as a strategic positioning in the face of the metaphysical interpretations of his Sethian Platonist predecessors with respect to the same foundational text.[23]

A new program of research thus deploys itself before us, and which consists of following, step by step, Plotinus' argumentation, understood as a reaction to his immediate intellectual and cultural milieu, in which the Gnostics held a place of importance which was becoming even more apparent, most particularly in the preceding decade. Plotinus is, without a doubt, an abstract thinker and a metaphysician, but his theoretical stances occupy as well several particular strategic positions. Both bear

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[21] Generally, when the theme of audacity surfaces in Plotinus, the Gnostics are close at hand, and we will have the opportunity to confirm this later for the τολμῆσαι of 6 (IV 8), 8, 1, in Study 2.

[22] Art. cit. (note 1), pp. 6–8.

[23] Regarding the pre-Plotinian use of the *Parmenides*, tied to the presumed Middle Platonic origin of the anonymous commentary to the *Parmenides* (the *Anonymus Tauriensis* attributed by P. Hadot to Porphyry), see K. Corrigan's "Platonism and Gnosticism. The Anonymous *Commentary* on the *Parmenides*: Middle or Neoplatonic?", in *Gnosticism and Later Platonism. Themes, Figures, and Texts*, J.D. Turner–R.D. Majercik (Eds), Atlanta GA, Society of Biblical Literature, 2000, pp. 141–178. For a recent discussion on the relations between the *Parmenides* and the character of the Platonizing Sethians, see J.D. Turner's clarification, "Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition", in *Gnose et Philosophie. Études en hommage à Pierre Hadot*, J.-M. Narbonne–P.-H. Poirier (Eds), Paris/Québec, Vrin/PUL, 2009, pp. 147–221 (especially p. 175 ff.), of which we will keep in mind the conclusion: "one may suppose that several pre-Plotinian, Middle Platonic expositions of the *Parmenides* were available in the late second to early third centuries that were used by the versions of *Zostrianos* (ca. 225 CE) and *Allogenes* (ca. 240 CE) known to Plotinus and Porphyry, and that they may indeed predate even these treatises as well as the anonymous *Parmenides Commentary*, itself composed perhaps around 200 CE." (p. 205)

a relation with the other, in any case, because, on the field of Platonic interpretation, the game is rough, and Plotinus must adapt his answers, as the situation evolves, to the criticisms and the pitfalls that come his way. This is why, in lieu of the idea of a simple *evolution*, it seems appropriate to introduce that of *developments* in the work, where, without necessarily denying his general presuppositions, the author is nonetheless lead to adapt, or even give a new *inflection* to certain facets of his doctrine, something that would be an intermediate, so to speak, between outright evolution, and a benign change in emphasis.

In another study (Study 3), the reader will find an example of what seems to be a doctrinal evolution or, at the very least, a motivated change, when Plotinus, after having attacked, in 33, the Gnostic admission of a psychic origin of evil, develops himself in 51 a theory which explicitly holds matter to be the universal cause of evil, including, that is, *the weakness of the soul itself*, a soul which is from then on seen free of guilt as never before in his teachings. How might we come to understand such a doctrinal innovation, if not as a direct reaction to a theoretical debate of which 33 alone reveals the crux? Another example is furnished again in Study 4, where the mode of the soul's reascent towards the supreme Principle is seen to be closely associated with the Intellect in Treatise 38, as opposed to what is described in, amongst others, Treatise 9, demonstrating a change in perspective for which the ultimate explanation must, without a doubt, reside in Plotinus' criticism directed, in 33, at the Gnostics for thinking themselves able to *reascend alone towards the principle*! And there is evidently no reason to limit ourselves to those two cases. On numerous doctrinal points—such as the theory of contemplation (Study 5), the concept of art, the Platonist/Gnostic theory of three types of men, the thesis of the partially undescended soul or that of the kinship of the souls—the history of Plotinus' dialogue with the Gnostics seems to have played a decisive role, not only in the initial setting of the problematics, but in determining the course of their development. Soon, it will be possible to pursue new inquiries along these lines.

It seems, in any case, that two of the major difficulties that burdened Plotinian thought have been overcome favourably, thanks to a new focus on Gnostic teachings. I am referring here to the origin of matter-evil and to the dogma of the partial non-descent of the soul. In both of these cases, as we will see, it is the attention now given to the Gnostic texts which has allowed scholarship to arrive at their solutions. Indeed, reinserted in the context of the Gnostic speculations on the destiny of the soul, the

Plotinian theory of the *forever elevated* soul no longer appears strange, as it can be understood as the philosophical version of the Gnostic belief according to which the soul of the chosen is *consubstantial* with the divine. In Plotinus, the undescended soul as such, ὁμοούσιος with the divine, can know a destiny as glorious as that which the Gnostics usually reserve for the chosen only. The second difficulty raises the question of whether evil comes from the soul, that is, from realities which, in the end, are divine, as Plotinus reproaches the Gnostics for professing in 33, or from elsewhere. But what exactly is Plotinus' solution to this difficulty and how does it distinguish itself from the Gnostic stance he condemns? This thorny problem has long befuddled Plotinus' commentators, encumbered as they were by the diversity, and sometimes by the ambiguity of his comments pertaining to matter, and especially by the opposition between chapters 10 to 12 of Treatise 33 and the chapter 14 of Treatise 51, the latter apparently presenting a doctrine similar to that being rejected in the former. Here again, the solution to the difficulty rests on having a principle which allows us to correctly articulate Plotinus' exchanges with his opponents: the passage pertaining to the generation of matter by the soul in 51, for example, is now to be understood as being, not the philosopher's answer to the problem of the origin of matter and evil in his own system, but only the *reiteration* of the Gnostic position, already decried in 33 and reiterated once again in 51. Once this narrative is brought to light, the Plotinian text loses, in essence, most of its apparent incongruities, and the solution to the problem of evil, as expounded by Plotinus, appears as distinctly opposed to that defended by the Gnostics.

STUDY ONE

THE CONTROVERSY OVER THE GENERATION OF MATTER IN PLOTINUS: THE RIDDLE RESOLVED?

Part I. Plotinus and the Gnostics on the Generation of Matter (33 [II 9], 12 and 51 [I 8], 14)

When examining the reception of Platonism in late Antiquity, we can recognize three characteristic periods in the interpretation of the relation between the existence of evil and the generation of sensible matter. With regard to Middle Platonism—with authors such as Plutarch of Chæronæ, Atticus, Numenius, Cronius, Celsus and Harpocration—it is matter (more specifically matter through an evil Soul, according to Plutarch, and through bodies, according to Harpocration) which constitutes evil, but this matter is not itself generated, and therefore does not come from an anterior principle.[1] Conversely, all of Plotinus' Neoplatonist successors do not consider matter to be an original reality, but rather one that stems from an anterior principle. However, this matter is no longer identified with evil. Plotinus alone (or nearly alone)[2] would constitute an intermediary figure, since he would profess, on the one hand, the intrinsically evil character of matter, and would claim, on the other—although not always explicitly—, that this matter is generated.

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[1] For Plutarch and Atticus, cf. Proclus, *Commentary on Plato's* Timæus, vol. II, D. Runia–M. Share (transl.), Cambridge, Cambridge U. Press, 2007, p. 391 (henceforth *In Tim.*); for Numenius, fr. 52 Des Places; for Numenius, Cronius and Harpocration, cf. Iamblichus, *De Anima*, J.F. Finamore–J.M. Dillon (text, transl. and commentary), Leiden, Brill, 2002, p. 49 (Wachsmuth p. 375, 6–28, §22–23); for Celsus, cf. Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 4, 65; 8, 55.

[2] See however the case of Moderatus, who, if we are to believe in the complex testimony of Porphyry's Περὶ ὕλης, as reported by Simplicius (*In Phys.*, pp. 230, 34–231, 24 = fr. 236 F. Smith [a good account of the issues regarding this text is found in H. Dörrie–M. Baltes, *Der Platonismus in der Antike*, Band 4, Baustein 122, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, Frommann-Holzboog, 1996, p, 176ff. and 477ff.]), would have also taught both things at the same time, as well as the case of the *Chaldean Oracles* (fr. 34 and 88 Des Places; comp. Psellus, *Hypotyp.* 27, p. 75, 34 Kroll). Porphyry's own position, very close to that of Plotinus, will be examined later.

Of this audacious standpoint, Proclus wrote a famous refutation which occupies chapters 30 to 37 of his *De malorum subsistentia* (*On the Existence of Evils*[3]), where Plotinus' doctrine is pushed to its last limit. According to Proclus, if matter is indeed evil, either we are faced with a fundamental dualism bringing two original antithetical principles together, or evil has proceeded from the Good and the responsibility for evil falls back on the Good itself. The first option is judged by Proclus to contravene the very axioms of Neoplatonism, given that multiplicity always presupposes the prior existence of a unity: Plotinus himself refuses to follow this option.[4] The second option, however, which is supported by Plotinus, seems just as impracticable to Proclus, who offers several objections to it, most notably (in chapters 31 to 33): [1] that since the cause is, by definition, superior to its effect, the generating principle of evil would be even worse than the evil of which it is the principle; from this, there would follow an inversion of its own qualities (it would be good and evil at the same time), and a corresponding inversion in its effect. [2] If it is necessary for the universe's construction, matter cannot be an absolute evil. [3] If matter is truly impassible, it should not be able to oppose itself to anything. [4] Matter cannot be the cause of the soul's fall, because the soul's weakness intervenes before matter does. [5] Moreover, if matter was the cause of the soul's fall, how could one explain the difference in attitudes among the souls? [6] And what action could be imposed on others by a matter that is incapable of acting in principle and is itself without quality? [7] Finally, if the soul's appetite for the sensible is the cause of its fall, it is not matter, but rather the appetite that is evil; if it is matter, then the soul no longer has either autonomy or any choice left to exercise—an untenable conclusion.

According to Proclus, God cannot produce evil anymore than heat can produce cold. In fact, neither unmixed nor original evil exists, but evil actually reveals itself as a simple negative correspondent of each level of good, it is a "subcontrary to some good, though not to all the good" (*De mal. subs.*, *op. cit.* [note 3], § 9, 18, 19; § 54, 23, 29), and as long as it does not have a principal cause, but rather several causes. It has only a "counter-existence", or a "parasitic" existence (παρυπόστασις),[5] since it

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[3] J. Opsomer–C. Steel (transl.), Ithaca, NY, Cornell U. Press, 2003.

[4] 12 (II 4), 2, 9–10; 24 (V 6), 3, 2–3; for Proclus, see *The Elements of Theology*, E.R. Dodds (transl.), Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1963, prop. 5, pp. 5–7.

[5] For this term, which is very difficult to translate, see A.Ph. Segonds, *In Alc.* I, p. 191, n. 98, Paris, Belles Lettres (Budé), 1985.

occurs accidently and in a manner parallel with the good, from which it borrows its very power of opposition (§ 53–54).

For the moment, I do not wish to address either the difficulties specific to Proclus' position, or the question of knowing whether several (or at least some) of the objections that he raises against the Plotinian position can be turned against his own analysis. But I would like to focus more specifically on Proclus' second option considered as a whole, that is, to the problem of the dual opposition of good and evil within an emanatist *and potentially integral* system like that of Plotinus, as it is without a doubt this difficulty which has brought several commentators to either deny any generation of matter[6] or try to minimize matter's negative role or its intrinsically evil character.[7]

One of the more recent attempts at neutralizing matter's noxious nature in Plotinus' system has been to develop a theory of partial causes: matter would be a necessary, but not a sufficient cause of the existence of evil, evil requiring an additional cause, which would be the soul. It is a theory of this nature which we find defended by O'Brien[8] and which had already been contemplated by Hager.[9]

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[6] Cf. Ph.V. Pistorius, *Plotinus and Neoplatonism*, Cambridge, Bowes & Bowes, 1952, pp. 117–133; H.-R. Schwyzer, "Zu Plotins Deutung der sogennanten platonischen Materie", in *Zêtêzis*, album amicorum […] aangeboden aan Prof. Dr. E. de Strycker, Antwerpen/Utrecht, De Nederlandse Boekhandle, 1973, p. 276; H. Benz, *Materie und Wahrnehmung in der Philosophie Plotins*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 1990, pp. 110–111, 165.

[7] It is the case notably for Hager, Schwyzer and Rist. See, with regards to this point, our analyses in *La métaphysique de Plotin; suivi de Henôsis et Ereignis: remarques sur une interprétation heideggérienne de l'Un plotinien* (Paris, Vrin, 2001, 2nd ed., pp. 124–125). Blumenthal (*Plotinus' Psychology*, La Haye, Martinus Nijhoff, 1971, pp. 1–2) has pointed out quite convincingly that Plotinus maintained *simultaneously* two points of view on sensible matter: one according to which matter remains inert and subject to everything that communicates form, and one according to which matter, as the source of evil, is actively opposed to form.

[8] "Plotinus on Evil. A Study of Matter and the Soul in Plotinus' Conception of Human Evil", in *Le Néoplatonisme. Colloques internationaux du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, sciences humaines*, Paris, CNRS, 1971, pp. 113–146: "It is possible, I think, to see why this conception [of evil in Plotinus] has eluded the grasp of commentators hitherto. In the first place, the notion of part cause has been missed. Plotinus has been thought to be inconsistent, because the soul's weakness and the presence of matter have been taken to be each sole and sufficient cause of human evil. Instead, I suggest, the soul's weakness and the presence of matter are part causes of evil in the soul. They are never singly but only jointly a sufficient cause. In the second place, there has been confusion of sufficient condition and sufficient cause." (p. 143)

[9] "Die Materie und das Böse im antiken Platonismus", *Museum Helveticum*, 19 (1962), pp. 73–103, reprinted in *Die Philosophie des Neuplatonismus*, C. Zintzen [Ed.],

To illustrate the interactivity of these two causes, we could call on what has perhaps been rightly named the "analogy" of "malicious talk",[10] according to which B (= matter) speaks maliciously, whether or not A (= soul) is weak enough to listen to it. In this situation, every time A is weak enough to listen to the malicious talk, both partial causes will be present and evil will arise.

Now, this approach is indeed suggestive, but it is significantly impeded by the fact that Plotinus' description of matter in Treatise 51 is in no way comparable to the simple proliferation of words to which one could or not pay attention, but to a very concrete *activity*. I will quote here a crucial excerpt of Treatise 51:

> But there are many powers of soul, and it has a beginning, a middle and an end; and matter is there, *and begs it and, we may say, bothers it and wants to come right inside* [προσαιτεῖ καὶ οἷον καὶ ἐνοχλεῖ καὶ εἰς τὸ εἴσω παρελθεῖν θέλει]. "All the place is holy", and there is nothing which is without a share of soul. So matter spreads itself out under soul and is illumined, and cannot grasp the source from which its light comes […]. Matter *darkens* the illumination, the light from that source, *by mixture with itself, and weakens it* [ἐσκότωσε τῇ μίξει καὶ ἀσθενὲς πεποίηκε] by itself offering it the opportunity of generation and the reason for coming to matter […]. This is the fall of the soul, to come in this way to matter and to become weak, because all its powers do not come into action; matter hinders [κωλυούσης ὕλης] them from coming by occupying [καταλαβεῖν] the place which soul holds and producing a kind of cramped condition, and *making evil what it has got hold of by a sort of theft* [ὃ δ' ἔλαβεν οἷον κλέψασα ποιῆσαι κακὸν εἶναι]—until soul manages to escape back to its higher state. (14, 34–49)

Here we find without doubt the most accentuated expression of Plotinian dualism, where matter is apparently endowed with a kind of will (θέλει line 36), and where it attempts to darken, to weaken and to taint that which it seizes as if by theft.[11] In this context, Plotinus is very consistent,

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Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977, pp. 427–469: "Es ließe sich zu dieser Widerlegung noch hinzufügen, daß zwar ein gewisser Mangel in der Seele die *Condicio sine qua non* der Schlechtigkeit, die in die Seele eindringt, und damit auch des Verfallens der Seele an die Materie ist, aber nicht die Hauptursache des Übels, das erst durch die fatalen Auswirkungen der Materie richtig konstituiert wird". (pp. 449–450)

[10] Cf. O'Brien, who develops this explanation on p. 140ff. of the above mentioned article, *op. cit*. (note 8).

[11] On matter's effective action, see some anticipations in 1 (I 6), 5, 31–39, where the parallel between "πεποίηκε δὲ αὐτὴν [matter] ἀκάθαρτον καὶ πολλῷ τῷ κακῷ συμπεφυρμένην" (33–34) and "φῶς ἐσκότωσε τῇ μίξει καὶ ἀσθενὲς πεποίηκε" (51 [I 8], 14, 41–42) is quite striking, and also in 26 (III 6), 14, 5–10. However, the dualism is more

since he announced some pages earlier, in chapter 6, that matter was in fact a principle opposed to the Good (lines 33–35), that they were both like two separate wholes no longer having anything in common between them (lines 54–55), and he explicitly clarifies this thesis in chapter 14, showing *how* this dualism manifests itself concretely. Moreover, in 51, chapter 14, Plotinus concludes by saying: "So matter is the cause of the soul's weakness and vice: it is then itself evil before soul and is primary evil" (49–51); hence, there is no room left for a partial cause, as Plotinus has already announced earlier, stating: "If this is true, then we must not be assumed to be the principle of evil as being evil by and from ourselves; evils are prior to us." (5, 26–28)[12]

It has been recently suggested[13] that this primarily psychic version of evil's origin corresponded more with the Gnostic or Christian worldview, where evil depends on soul making perverse choices.[14] On this point,

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marked in Treatise 51 for, in 26, chap. 14, matter "by its presence and its self-assertion and a kind of begging and its poverty makes a sort of violent attempt to grasp [the image which comes over it], and is cheated by not grasping" (8–9), while in 51 (I 8), 14, matter makes "evil what it has got hold of by a sort of theft" (48–49), and so succeeds in doing that which it could not achieve in 26. The opposition of principles then appears indeed to be more radical in Treatise 51 than anywhere else in the corpus. See as well 52 (II 3), 9, 21–22, regarding the possible domination effectuated by the body.

[12] D. O'Meara, the last French translator hitherto of Treatise 51 (*Plotin. Traité 51*, Paris, Cerf, 1999), has not endorsed this presumed partial cause: "Matter, which would not be in itself necessarily evil, is not reducible either to a necessary condition of the appearance of evil […]." (p. 157, translated)

[13] Cf. O'Meara, *Ibid*, p. 15, 118 and 163, who refers us, for example, to 33 (II 9), 12, 35–44, for the Gnostics, and, for the Christians, to Origen, *On First Principles*, I 5, 2–3; II 9, 6.

[14] This version also corresponds to the Porphyrian version of dualism, which is more mitigated than that of Plotinus and which, according to the contexts, calls for the intervention of two causes of evil, either the soul, or demons influenced by matter (cf. especially *De abst*. II 38, 39 and 46; *Ep. ad Marc*., XVI and XXI [in *Porphyry to Marcella*, A. Zimmern (transl.), London, G. Redway, 1896]). By this same ambiguity, which has rightly left several interpreters in a quandary, we can say that Porphyrian dualism remains close to Plotinian dualism. However, there are nonetheless notable differences between both authors. First, Porphyry nowhere explicitly professes, as in Plotinus, that matter is evil in itself and the primary cause of every evil in the soul, even if it seems that, according to him, matter is implicated, sometimes even apparently actively, in the production of evil. (Regarding this point, however, it is necessary to correct Hager's judgement [art. cit. (note 9), p. 454], as well as Waszink's ["Porphyrios und Numenios", in *Die Philosophie des Neuplatonismus*, *op. cit*. (note 9), p. 199] and Betchle's "Das Böse im Platonismus: Überlegungen zur Position Jamblichs" [*Bochumer Philosophisches Jahrbuch für Antike und Mittelalter*, 4 (1999), p. 81] who, based on *Sentences* 30 and 37 as well as on *De abst*. I 30, all infer a material origin of evil in Porphyry and, in the case of Waszink, Porphyry's incoherence not only from one text to another, but also within a single text [targeting,

one has to recall the disturbing similarity between the Gnostic position denounced by Plotinus in 33 (II 9), 12, 3–44, and the final statement, to which we will come to shortly, of 51 (I 8), 14, 51–54. Might we imagine that he who criticizes the Gnostics—or certain Gnostics—for making evil depend on the soul instead of making it depend on the sensible universe and on matter itself, is also the he who, in 51, proclaims the generation of sensible matter—which, as we know, is evil—by the soul?

In his critique of the Gnostic thesis (33 [II 9]), Plotinus is relatively clear on at least two points, first that the world's creation does not take place in time, and second, that evil cannot emanate from superior beings, and particularly from the soul's productive activity. He writes:

> For their "illumination of the darkness," if it is investigated, will make them admit the true causes of the universe. For why was it necessary for the soul to illuminate, unless the necessity was universal? It was either according to soul's nature or against it. But if it was according to its nature, it must always be so. If, on the other hand, it was against its nature, then there will be a place for what is against nature in the higher world, and evil will exist before this universe, and the universe will not be responsible for evil, but the higher world will be the cause of evil for this world, and evil will not come from the world here to the soul, but from the soul to the world here; and the course of the argument will lead to the attribution of responsibility for the universe to the first principles: and if the universe, then also the matter, from which the universe on this hypothesis would have emerged. For the soul which declined saw, they say [φάσιν, line 40], and illuminated

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in this case, the *Sentences*]. In fact, in *Sentence* 30, 14–16 [Lamberz, p. 21, 3–5], matter is said to be an evil, not in itself, but only for particular souls who have the power of turning towards it [same approach in *Sentence* 32, 45–47 (Lamberz, p. 26, 2–4)], and *Sentence* 37, though it is quite difficult to interpret, clearly shows the power of the soul acting as a differential factor in the emergence of evil, which is also, must we conclude, the teaching of *De abst*. I 30, 4, where the author speaks of the προσπάθεια of the soul for terrestrial things, and where the soul's perversity [τινα μοχθηρίαν τῆς ψυχῆς, 30, 7] is identified as a cause of evil). Secondly, Porphyry never goes as far as talking about an opposition of two antithetic principles, as Plotinus dares to do in 51 (I 8) 6, 33. Thirdly, Porphyry insists on certain occasions on the fact that it is the soul, and nothing else but the soul, that is responsible for its faults, with the explicit intent to deny all possible recourse to another instance different from itself, whereas he states nowhere, as we have seen, the opposite thesis. Porphyry writes theses words, well known yet worth quoting again here: "Neither let us accuse our flesh as the cause of great evils, nor attribute our troubles to outward things. Rather let us seek the cause of these things in our souls, and casting away every vain striving and hope for fleeting joys, let us become completely masters of ourselves." (*Ep. ad Marc*. XXIX, *ibid*., p. 74) Consequently, Plotinus' dualism in Treatise 51 is not only more marked, it is also much more self conscious than Porphyry's. For all these reasons, it is clear that Plotinian dualism cannot find its legitimacy in this type of analysis, which makes of the soul's attitude evil's last resort, to which Porphyry's more watered-down dualism lends itself.

> the darkness already in existence. Where, then, did the darkness come from? If they are going to say [φήσουσιν, line 41] that the soul made it when it declined, there was obviously nowhere for it to decline to, and the darkness itself was not responsible for the decline, but the soul's own nature. But this is the same as attributing the responsibility to pre-existing necessities; so the responsibility goes back to the first principles.
>
> (12, 30–44)

Now, it is this same idea—that it is impossible to attribute the cause of evil to the intelligible realities which are pre-existing, and notably to the soul—that also prevails in Plotinus' exposition of Treatise 51, for example in 5, 26–28: "If this is true, then we must not be assumed to be the principle of evil as being evil by and from ourselves; evils are prior to us"; or in 14, 49–51: "So matter is the cause of the soul's weakness and vice: it is then itself evil before soul and is primary evil."[15] The idea that soul is not the source of evil goes hand in hand with the idea that evil, which originates in matter, is an *exterior* element which, added to the soul, corrupts or taints it (the thesis of evil as an "addition" is already present in the first treatises, such as 1 [I 6], 5, 31–34 and 2 [IV 7], 10, 11–12, and we find it again in the late Treatise, 51 [I 8], 5, 17; 8, 20; 14, 24).

On this sole basis, the generation of sensible matter by the soul reveals itself to be practically impossible. To attribute this doctrine to Plotinus is to expose him to the criticisms of Proclus, Simplicius, and of all those who subsequently have considered his doctrine to be problematic, or the text which they were reading, which is 51 (I 8), 14, 51–54: "Even if soul itself produced matter, being affected in some way, and became evil by communicating with it, matter is the cause by its presence: soul would not have come to it unless its presence had given soul the occasion of coming to birth."

This text, which is a paraphrase of the Gnostic generation of matter by an inclining soul, has understandably been subject to numerous attempts at 'interpreting it away'. Nevertheless, in whatever way the text is approached, does it not state clearly that the *result* of the soul's creative activity is the appearance of absolute evil? How can we admit this possibility, when we know that Plotinus has already rejected it in

[15] This assertion does not lead, however, to the individual's complete freedom from responsibility. In 51 (I 8), 5, 29–30, Plotinus indeed specifies that there is "an escape from the evils in the soul for those who are capable of it, though not all men are." Consequently, even in this treatise, where the dualism is more marked, a certain amount of leeway is left to human initiative. On which, see again later, n. 41.

Treatise 33 and objects to it once again in the preceding lines (49–51)? This is what has been so problematic about this passage. Let us remember, for example, the remark formerly made by Theiler: "Der Schluß ist so überraschend, daß Müller τῇ ὕλῃ (mittels), Bury, *Class. Quart.*, 39, 1945, 85 τι ἐν ὕλῃ konjizierte".[16] According to Müller (and all editors after him until Henry–Schwyzer), the reasonable approach consisted in slightly amending the text in such a way that the soul no longer generates matter, but "is generative while being affected by matter". Bury, meanwhile, proposed that we read that the soul "has generated something in matter while being affected", arguing that matter being so produced by the soul is "bad Platonism". This seems correct, especially when this matter is evil in itself. Essentially, Müller's and Bury's conjectures are similar and both make it possible to avoid the teratogenesis which certain Gnostics espoused (and as Plotinus supposedly did, according to some). Was it an excess of conservatism that pushed Henry–Schwyzer to reject these conjectures? Perhaps, but surely not that alone, as we will see when we return to this shortly. According to Schwyzer (for whom, we might recall, matter is not generated), the entire final sentence must be read as an unreal condition, and should therefore not count as a Plotinian proposition. The Greek allows for this possibility (Armstrong, for example, translates along these lines), and it has accordingly been much discussed. However, even understood as an unreal conditional, the sentence remains embarrassing. Indeed, what sense would there be in affirming that *even* if soul *had generated matter* (that which it would not have done), matter would have been the cause of soul to begin with? Even in the unreal mode, the idea of *an effect that is the cause of its cause* still does not make sense. Hence, it is necessary to find another interpretation, or else, fall back on Müller's or Bury's conjectures.

Let us reflect carefully on the following: within the entire Plotinian corpus, this part of a sentence in Treatise 51 (I 8), 14, 51 (αὐτὴ ἡ ψυχὴ τὴν ὕλην ἐγέννησε), is the only one that postulates a psychic origin of the ὕλη.[17] To dispose of this text is to dispose of the doctrine itself, which does not find any other support in Plotinus' writings. In reality, none of the other passages referred to in support of this interpretation (essentially

[16] *Plotins Schriften*, Band V b, Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 1960, p. 416.

[17] The alternative of 6 (IV 8), 6, 18–23, which leaves open the question of whether sensible matter is generated or not, does not provide any information about the eventual production mode of matter and remains silent on the eventual role of the soul in the process.

two passages on which everything would rest)[18] mention the creation of ὕλη, but rather only mention something that undoubtedly shares some features with it, but which we cannot (as Plotinus himself does not) identify with matter. On the other hand, what is in this way produced by the soul (a 'darkness', a 'non-definition', a 'non-being', a 'generated without life')[19] *makes* and *presents itself* as matter itself *does not* (*i.e.* as a friendly environment, a body, etc., as opposed to matter, which remains exterior, does not manage to pass into the interior, etc.). To eliminate the ambiguity in these two passages would bring us back to this single text of Treatise 51 (I 8), 14, where Plotinus would personally support a Gnostic doctrine that he, all the same, refutes elsewhere.

One possible source of misunderstanding can be cleared away: the Gnostic generation of material darkness rejected by Plotinus in Treatise 33, chapter 12, is indeed a Gnostic thesis and not an inference made by Plotinus himself while seeking to impose his own thought against that of his adversaries. Several Gnostic schools of thought maintain the idea of a generation of matter (or darkness) by Sophia,[20] as some Nag Hammadi texts attest, for example, the *Hypostasis of the Archons*(II 4) and the *Zostrianos* treatise (VIII 1).[21] In his *Against the Gnostics*, Plotinus

[18] According to K. Corrigan, there would in fact not be *two*, but only *one* passage in the entire Plotinian corpus to positively defend the generation of sensible matter by a partial soul, that is in Treatise 15 (III 4), 1 (*Plotinus' Theory of Matter-Evil and the Question of Substance: Plato*, *Aristotle*, *and Alexander of Aphrodisias*, Leuven, Peeters, 1996, pp. 258–259). The author is himself surprised of this: "Surely it is remarkable that only one passage in the *Enneads* should yield conclusive proof (without need of any further argument) that matter is generated by the partial, but pure soul […]" ("Positive and Negative Matter in Later Platonism: the Uncovering of Plotinus's Dialogue with the Gnostics", in *Gnosticism and Later Platonism …*, *op. cit*. [note 23], p. 31). But this last passage, where the term ὕλη is not present, only offers doubtful support, as we will see later, for the thesis of matter's generation by soul.

[19] These are not "à n'en pas douter, les traits propres de la matière", as O'Brien imprudently writes (*Théodicée plotinienne, théodicée gnostique*, Leiden, Brill, 1993, p. 24), since, in Treatise 27 (IV 3), 9, 22–29, a light, at its limits, generates a *darkness* (σκότος, line 25) which is not matter, but the place (τόπος) which will then be informed by the soul to form a body.

[20] With regard to this, see E. Thomassen ("The Derivation of Matter in Monistic Gnosticism", in *Gnosticism and Later Platonism*, *op. cit*. [note 23], pp. 1–17), who refers to various sources (Irenæus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, I 2, 3; 4, 2; 8, 4; II 10, 3–4; 13, 7; 18, 7; 19, 4; 20, 5; Clement of Alexandria, *Exc.* 67, 4; Tertullian, *Val.* 15, 1; we could consider as well Pseudo-Hippolytus, *Panarion* VI 29–36 [pp. 155, 15–166, 14 Wendland]) and concludes: "A theory about the origin of Matter forms part of all the attested variants of the Valentinian system." (p. 2) This fact, adds the commentator, had already been noted by H. Jonas (*The Gnostic Religion*, Boston, Beacon, 1963, p. 105).

[21] See notably the analysis provided by J. Turner (*Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic*

obviously does not attempt to faithfully and methodically expose, as a doxographer would, the different Gnostic movements known to him, but, as is to be expected, intends to use all available means against his opponents.[22] Hence, from a Gnostic point of view, we cannot draw any conclusion from the shift from the present to the future tense (φάσιν/φήσουσιν), in Plotinus' presentation of their doctrine, a transition that is easily explained from a rhetorical perspective ("they say that …" to which we answer that …, and then maybe "they will say that …", etc.). Moreover, we know through Porphyry (*Vit. Pl.* 16) that a great number of Gnostic treatises circulated in the School, although refuted many times by Plotinus himself in his courses, while Amelius and Porphyry themselves were mandated by Plotinus to refute, the *Zostrianos* and the *Zoroaster* respectively. Plotinus, then, was able to draw from a rich and diversified background of Gnostic doctrines to organize his counter-attack.

We can now return to the two other passages that supposedly support the doctrine of matter's generation by soul in Plotinus. We will begin with 13 (III 9), 3, where Plotinus writes:

> The partial soul, then, is illuminated when it goes towards that which is before it—for then it meets reality—but when it goes towards what comes after it, it goes towards non-existence. But it does this, when it goes towards itself, for, wishing to be directed towards itself it makes an image of itself, the non-existent, as if walking on emptiness and becoming more indefinite; and this [we read here τοῦτο] indefinite image is every way dark: for it is altogether without reason and unintelligent and stands far removed from reality. Up to the time between it [the Soul] is in its own world, but when it looks at the image again, as it were directing its attention to it a second time, it forms it and goes into it rejoicing. (7–16)

Tradition, Québec/Louvain-Paris, PUL/Peeters, 2001, p. 572ff.). As an example, here is the translation provided by Turner of the passage of the *Hypostasis of the Archons* II 94: "Within limitless realms dwells incorruptibility. Sophia, who is called Pistis, wanted to create something, alone with her consort; and her product was a celestial thing. A veil exists between the upper realm and the aeons below; and *a shadow came into being beneath the veil; and that shadow became matter; and that shadow was projected apart. And what she had created became a product in the matter, like an aborted fetus. And it assumed a plastic form molded out of shadow, and became an arrogant beast resembling a lion*."

[22] On the only comparison of 33 (II 9), 10, with what we know about the Gnosis, Turner could conclude: "The underscored material is very similar to the account in *Zostrianos*, while the other material could have come from many sources, including *Apocryphon of John*, the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, and others including Valentinian ones" (*Ibid*., p. 575). M. Tardieu, who reaches the same conclusion ("Les gnostiques dans la *Vie de Plotin*", *op. cit*. [note 9], pp. 503–563), notes: "Plotinus has not refuted a particular text but rather doctrines represented by several texts." (p. 529, translated)

Is this completely dark image, lacking any reason, which is thus produced, matter itself? Three facts lead us to doubt it. First of all, the soul delights in informing this image and in entering it, whereas we know that the relationship between soul and matter is not one of serene pleasure, but rather terrible strife—in 38 (VI 7), 33, 32–34, moreover, Plotinus specifies that the lovable (ἐράσμιον) that receives form is not matter ("But matter is necessarily furthest from it, because it does not have of itself any one even of the last and lowest shapes. If then what is lovable is not the matter, but what is formed by the form …")—, and nothing in this passage evokes this confrontation and the usual malaise the soul experiences when facing matter.[23] Secondly, this image is informed by the descending soul which enters it, but the peculiarity of matter is to be formless and to take no form. Passages confirming this point are again numerous, but I will quote, notably, 12 (II 4), 13, 23–24, where Plotinus writes: "The distinctive characteristic, too, of matter is not shape: for it consists in not being qualified and not having any form […]." Likewise, in 25 (II 5), 5, 20–22, Plotinus notes "it is only left for it to be potentially a sort of weak and dim phantasm unable to receive a shape (μορφοῦσθαι μὴ δυνάμενον)." One must avoid here the amalgamation of Aristotelian matter, which participates effectively in the compound, and Plotinian matter which never does. The latter always remains below any implication in the body and never comes to actuality, and its fate is never improved by something coming over it. Plotinian matter, placed beneath, always remains the same, unchanged, unchangeable, incorruptible, and in a certain way exterior (ἔξω 26 [III 6], 14, 19) to the place occupied by the soul, always "single and set apart from all other things [μόνον καὶ ἔρημενον τῶν ἄλλων]" (*ibid*., 9, 37), because it is "altogether different [πάντη ἑτέραν]" (*ibid*., 13, 23). It is therefore, the very same matter that, in treatises 12 and 36, runs under the size or the volume that form communicates to it, without being able in any way to mix with or benefit from the size

[23] The passages to this effect are numerous, as, for example, in 12 (II 4), 10, 34, where Plotinus tells us that the soul suffers from the indeterminate character of matter, or the several passages where, from its contact with or even from a simple glance towards matter, the soul receives an injury: 1 (I 6), 5, 32; 2 (IV 7), 10, 25; 6 (IV 8), 5, 28; 51 (I 8), 4, 17–18, 20–22. This doctrine is consistent with the idea—constant in Plotinus, as I have said—that evil is something exterior that is added to the soul: ὡς προσθῆκαι τὰ κακὰ τῇ ψυχῇ καὶ ἄλλοθεν (2 [IV 7], 10, 11–12). In trying to explain this soul's sudden delight, Theiler proposes in his commentary (*ad loc*.) the parallel with 6 (IV 8), 8, 22, although, in this last passage, the soul feels a false pleasure that disappoints, which is clearly not the case here (needless to say, the other parallels proposed by Theiler go no further in resolving this difficulty).

and qualities which come to be reflected on it,[24] and the same matter which, in Treatise 51, as we have seen, wants to enter inside (εἰς τὸ εἴσω 14, line 36), but is unable to because the entire place is sacred, and which therefore, from the outside, throws itself beneath (ὑποβάλλουσα ἑαυτὴν 14, line 38) and is illuminated by the soul. Thirdly, the entire set of themes from chapter 3 of Treatise 13 (III 9) do not pertain to matter (unnamed throughout the entire chapter) but to the place, more specifically to the "there where" (ὅπου, line 2) the World-Soul does not have to be, since it is not in any place, in contrast to other souls, that possess at the same time a "from where" and a "that towards which" they are going (ὅθεν … εἰς ὅ lines 4–5), and is consequently incapable of forming a body.

Recalling these facts shows at the same time that the other passage, on which we might have hoped to base the psychic generation of matter, offers even less support for this than did the preceding one, since Plotinus makes the effort to specify that the absolute undefined which is produced by the soul becomes a *body* and is taken to *perfection*, *achieved*, etc. Here is Armstrong's translation: "When it is perfected it becomes a body [Τελειούμενον δὲ γίνεται σῶμα], receiving the form appropriate to its potentiality, a receiver for the principle which produced it and brought it to maturity." (15 [III 4], 1, 14–16) This language is obviously not one which Plotinus uses when referring to matter. As we well know, matter does not actually become a body, it is never perfected in any way, and it never receives a form appropriate to its power. This still undefined thing described in 15 (III 4) is the place, the receiver of that which comes from the soul for the formation of a body, something that will be objectively perfected, and which consequently is not and cannot be ὕλη.[25] For he who is attentive to the precise and strictly limited role of Plotinian matter

[24] Cf. 12 (II 4), 11, 34–36; 26 (III 6), 17, 33–35; 18, 19–21.

[25] D. O'Brien has attempted to dismiss this obstacle by indicating first of all that "in a later treatise, matter would never become more than an 'image', because it is 'incapable' of being formed [μορφοῦσθαι μὴ δυνάμενον]." (*Théodicée plotinienne …*, *op. cit.* [note 19], p. 59, translated) But this impossibility, as we have just seen, is already raised in a treatise not *posterior* but *anterior* to Treatise 15, Treatise 12 (II 4), first in 13, 23–24, quoted above, where it is stated that what is peculiar to matter is *not to have form*, and in two other passages of the same treatise, first in 8, 13–15, where Plotinus states that matter cannot form a compound and that, even when one says that it 'receives' a form, it does not assume as such this form, which remains 'other' (*i.e.* different) than matter: "matter must not be composite, but simple and one thing in its own nature; for so it will be destitute of all qualities. And the giver of its shape will give it a shape which is different from matter itself [ἄλλην οὖσαν παῤ αὐτὴν]" (8, 13–15); and in 12, 30–33, he repeats again that matter cannot be a body: "Is it [matter] touch, then? No, because it is not a

in the sensible world, the assertion in Treatise 15 (III 4), to the effect that the absolute indefinite is transformed into a body in which it is perfected (τελειούμενον), is equivalent to a sort of signature or, if one prefers, to a warning, as if Plotinus was admonishing us not be mistaken about this thing which he describes. Although this thing may be like matter, undefined and formless, it is not matter, since what happens to it cannot happen to matter.[26] This is also why, in such contexts, Plotinus never talks about ὕλη. Thus, Schwyzer was right to note, in reference to 13 (III 9), 3, 7–16: "Mit dem dortigen μὴ ὄν, εἴδωλον, πάντη σκοτεινόν ist nicht die Materie gemeint, sondern der Körper."[27] There is a text, as we have already mentioned[28] (but it is necessary to look at it again, and this time more closely), which definitely justifies Schwyzer's position, namely Treatise 27 (IV 3), 9, 20–26. In this text, it is quite clear that the soul generates for itself a *place* (τόπος), without which it could not proceed and produce this body that it is going to inhabit and that matter, as we have seen, cannot itself produce. Plotinus writes:

> For the truth is as follows. If body did not exist, soul would not go forth, since there is no place [τόπος] other than body where it is natural for it to be. But if it intends to go forth, it will produce a place [τόπος] for itself, and so a body. Soul's rest is, we may say, confirmed in absolute rest; a great light shines from it, and at the outermost edge of this firelight there is a darkness [σκότος]. Soul sees this darkness and informs it, since it is there as a substrate for form.

If that which soul generates for itself is this place that it is going to inhabit, born from the soul's own light that becomes, at its limits, a darkness because of a loss of power, the conclusion is that, in fact, the soul never goes out from itself properly speaking, as we have seen that matter, for its part, cannot go out of itself and enter in the soul's place, which is a sacred place. Thus is explained at the same time the relation of exteriority of evil with regards to the soul, evil being always, according to the model inherited from the *Phædo*, an addition, a fostering of something foreign to the soul. Darkness thus produced, which is the soul's place of residence,

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body [μηδὲ σῶμα], for touch apprehends body, because it apprehends density and rarity, hardness and softness, wetness and dryness; and none of these apply to matter."

[26] In 44 (VI 3), 2, 19ff., Plotinus asks if, here-below, we could consider the form to be "a kind of life and *perfection* of matter [οἷον ζωήν τινα καὶ **τελείωσιν** τῆς ὕλης]", only to answer again that there can be no question of it: "Now, first of all, matter does not hold or grasp form as its life or its activity, but form comes upon it from elsewhere and is not one of matter's possessions." (22–24)

[27] "Zu Plotins Deutung …", art. cit. (note 6), pp. 275–276.

[28] See note 19.

is precisely this friendly environment in which the soul, as we have seen, *delights*, in Treatise 13 (III 9), 3, 16, and at the same time, that which becomes a body and is perfected in 15 (III 4), 1.[29] The Υλη is not in question in any of this, which is why it is not mentioned.[30]

This point having been adequately established, we may now return to the problematic text at 51 (I 8), 14, which then becomes the only passage to speak objectively of matter's generation by the soul, and to speak of it precisely to reject its consequences. Since Plotinus does not defend this thesis anywhere else, and since he fiercely opposes a comparable thesis in Treatise 33, because it attributes the responsibility for evil to an activity belonging to pre-existing principles, we must conclude that the closing lines of Treatise 51 (I 8), 14, 51–54, do not reflect Plotinus' own thought, but, so that he might restate his opposition to it, simply re-invokes the previously vanquished Gnostic thesis. In other words, this text recalls the Gnostic thesis contested in Treatise 33, because it offers Plotinus an ideal setting in which to reaffirm his opposition to his old opponents.

Let us now reconsider the theme of the "illumination of darkness" in chapter 12, Treatise 33 (II 9). This illumination, explains Plotinus, which contributes to the production of the world, is either in accordance with nature (κατὰ φύσιν), or contrary to nature (παρὰ φύσιν). If it is in accordance with nature, it must always be so, and must consequently be eternal. If it is not in accordance with nature, however, the world (as a counter-natural product and as the source of evil) will come from prior principles. As Plotinus states:

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[29] We may also compare this text to 38 (VI 7) 7, 6–16, where Plotinus mentions a preliminary outline (προϋπογραφή) produced by the Soul of the All that traces in advance on matter, as would illuminations projected ahead, the path of each individual soul.

[30] That the last product of the partial soul is not matter itself has also been advocated recently by John Phillips ("Plotinus on the Generation of Matter", *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 3 (2009), pp. 103–137), who suggests that this last product is what in some contexts is called the "trace of soul" which, combined with matter, will eventually become the "'qualified body'". This is an interesting suggestion indeed, even though the term ἴχνος does not appear as such in either 15 (III 4) 1 or 13 (III 9), 3, where Phillips nevertheless understands the expression 'image of itself [the Soul]' (εἴδωλον αὐτῆς; line 11) as a reference to it. Be that as it may, the link between this "trace of soul" and the place (τόπος) would still have to be explained, as the role of Place in this process is mentioned in both 27 [IV 3], 9, 20–26 and 13 (III 9), 3, 4–5 (in this last passage under the expressions ὅθεν and εἰς ὅ). Furthermore, I have never identified *body* and τόπος, as Phillips asserts (p. 134, n. 70), but have said rather (while commenting on 15 [III 4], 1, 14–16) that: "Cette chose encore indéfinie est le lieu, c'est-à-dire le réceptacle de ce qui vient de l'âme *pour la formation d'un corps* …", which is evidently not the same. In any case, the crucial point remains that, whether *place* and/or *trace*, the partial soul does not produce matter.

> and if the universe, then also the matter, from which the universe on this hypothesis would have emerged. For the soul which declined saw, they say, and illuminated the darkness already in existence. Where, then, did the darkness come from? If they are going to say that the soul made it when it declined, there was obviously nowhere for it to decline to, and the darkness itself was not responsible for the decline, but the soul's own nature. But this is the same as attributing the responsibility to pre-existing necessities; so the responsibility goes back to the first principles. (12, 39–44)

What emerges clearly from this chapter's conclusion is that the question of knowing *where darkness comes from* cannot find its solution in a soul's inclination, for 1) the soul does not yet have a place towards which it might incline (logical argument: we can only incline towards that which already exists); and 2) the fault for evil-darkness would in any case reflect back to the soul (argument from theodicy).

However, is this not the exact exegetic context of Treatise 51? Indeed, what is stated there, if not [1] that the responsibility for evil must in each and every case be attributed to matter; and [2] that this attribution prevails even if one maintains that the soul, by being affected (by that which does not yet exist, as if it could incline towards that which does not yet exist!), has become evil through contamination with matter? One has just then to translate the text of 51 (I 8), 14, 51–54, taking into account these different parameters, that is to say, by keeping in mind the frame of discussion with the Gnostics, of which this passage is a reflection:

> So matter is the cause of the soul's weakness and vice: it is then itself evil before soul and is primary evil. Even if soul [*as certain Gnostic adversaries maintain*] **produced** matter, being affected in some way, and [*according to them*] had become evil by communicating with it, matter [*according to us*] is the cause by its presence. For, the soul would not have come to it unless its presence had given soul the occasion of coming to birth.

Several facts militate in favour of this last interpretation:

1. It is a well-known fact that because of Plotinus' exceptional *breviloquenz*, as Schwyzer[31] has once observed, it is often difficult to know the exact sense of certain passages in his work; but we must also keep in mind, again following Schwyzer,[32] that in several places, Plotinus neglects to indicate that the presented thesis is not his own, but an opposed thesis he intends to refute, which can only be understood in retrospect or by taking into account his philosophy as a whole.

[31] *Plotinos*, Munich, Druckenmüller, 1978 (= "Plotinos", in *RE* XXI 1 [1951], coll. 520).
[32] *Ibid*., coll. 524.

This would be the reason why other scholars were not always aware that they were faced with a resumption of the Gnostic argument already exposed and defeated, recalled now only to demonstrate its inconsistency once again.

2. Thus, the contradiction between both passages is avoided, that is, the contradiction between the thesis found in Treatise 33, chapter 12, according to which the soul generates the evil darkness and becomes consequently the source of evil—a thesis which Plotinus rejects—,[33] and the thesis which Plotinus would now advocate himself, in Treatise 51, of a soul that would purportedly be the cause of evil-matter.
3. We avoid the absurd recourse to a reverse causality from the effect to its own cause, which constitutes a logical monstrosity and which would reveal itself to be catastrophic for Plotinus' theodicy.
4. We better understand the curiously Gnostic tone of the description provided at the end of chapter 14, in 51, to which Theiler (*ad loc.*) had already drawn our attention: "Es ist in halb philosophischem Gewande ein gnostischer Satz, wonach Trauer und andere Affekte der Sophia sich zur ὕλη konkretisieren, z. B. Epiphanios Panar, 31, 12, 1 ff."; for we are indeed facing a Gnostic thesis, that one which Plotinus already knows and which he repeats here only to lead us closer towards his desired conclusion that evil's origin is material and need not be sought ἐν θεοῖς (*Theætetus*, 176a6), with the result that "θεὸς οὐδαμῇ οὐδαμῶς ἄδικος" (*Ibid.*, b8–c1), as Plato writes.
5. We also understand that it is a bad reading of the soul's role in the sensible world's generation that has confused the interpretation of this passage, otherwise quite clearly identifiable. Indeed, it is because some have believed they had already detected a generation of sensible matter by the soul elsewhere in the corpus that, having taken strength from this *conviction*,[34] they believed that they were

[33] Plotinus' own position, as far as it can be decoded in the dense anti-Gnostic argumentation of Chapter 12, Treatise 33, transpires on lines 22–23 where, in opposition to the arbitrary succession of the production of things in Gnosticism, Plotinus responds: "Why then, in the making of the world, too, was not matter marked in outline with the form of the universe, in which form earth and fire and the rest were contained?" Thus, to the arbitrary succession of the Gnostics, Plotinus opposes the whole plan of the universe, designed first on matter by the soul, to which different individual souls then adapt. For more on this, see also note 29, on the teaching of 38 (VI 7), 7, 6–16.

[34] This is why Theiler, who himself underscores the Gnostic character of the Plotinian sentence, does not reach the conclusion that Plotinus is only *referring* to a Gnostic thesis, recalling it to the stage to see it under a better light, persuaded as he is of having found

obliged to develop here an *ad hoc* theory allowing the inexplicable to be explained, the last sentence of chapter 14 remaining indeed otherwise incomprehensible ("soul would not have come to it [matter] unless its presence had given soul the occasion of coming to birth"), if it is the soul itself which generates matter.

6. We free ourselves from the problem, in itself unsolvable, of knowing if the sentence relating to the generation of matter (chap. 14, lines 51–53), which is devoid of any verb in the apodosis, must be understood as an unreal clause (thus Schwyzer)[35] or not (O'Brien[36]). Indeed, as soon as it is understood as a Gnostic position, as it has to be, both readings become possible and doctrinally equivalent.[37]
7. We avoid the problem of having to intervene artificially in the text to restore its meaning, remembering nonetheless that Müller and Bury had, from a doctrinal point of view, very good motives for proposing these conjectures.
8. Plotinus' own solution appears, from then on, in complete clarity and simplicity: matter must *already be there*, because one can no more incline towards what does not yet exist (this is the lesson of Treatise 33), than suffer from what does not yet exist (this is the lesson of Treatise 51); therefore, these two last hypotheses collapse: sensible matter *is already there*, because it is not generated by soul,[38] and it is because it is *already there* that it is the cause of the soul's descent and is as well the ultimate source of all evil.

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elsewhere in Plotinus "der Gedanke, dass die Seele die Materie Schafft auch 13 (III 9), 3, 12 ff.; 27 (IV 3), 9, 22 ff." (*Plotin's Schriften*, V b, *ad. Locum* 14, 47).

[35] Art. cit. (note 6), p. 275.

[36] *Plotinus on the Origin of Matter. An Exercise in the Interpretation of the Enneads*, Napoli, Bibliopolis, 1991, pp. 35–42.

[37] Here, for comparison, is the translation of the excerpt in the unreal mode: "Even if soul **had produced** matter [*as certain Gnostic adversaries maintain*], being affected in some way, and [*according to them*] had become evil by communicating with it, matter [*according to us*] would have been the cause by its presence: soul would not have come to it unless its presence had given soul the occasion of coming to birth." (Armstrong, I, p. 315, italicized insertions mine)

[38] Some of Plotinus' texts underline the existence of matter as being *prior* (of course from a logical point of view) with respect to soul's arrival, or evoke the state in which matter would be without it. The most important text is that of 10 (V 1), 2, 25–27: "before [the installation in it of] soul, it [the heaven] was a dead body, earth and water, or rather the darkness of matter and non-existence […]". In 26 (III 6), 16, 15 ff., Plotinus explains that if heaven and all that it contains ceased to exist, "matter would be left what it was (καταλειφθήσεται ὅπερ ἦν) and keep none of the qualifications which previously existed in it.". Also, see, along the same lines, 52 (II 3), 9, 43 ff.

However, Plotinus' peculiar position in this late Treatise remains to be explained where matter's counter-action on the descending soul is more pronounced than anywhere else. The most reasonable view might be to suppose that Plotinus wanted, through this, to distinguish his position from this threatening form of dualism—not only Gnostic—where it is soul that is identified in the end as the source of evil, not only because it would generate evil-matter, but also because it would remain the first one responsible for its own weakness or perversion, independently of this presence before it, generated or not, of an evil-matter, insofar as the initiative would come exclusively from the soul. This point is extremely important: the soul remains the source of evil not only if it produces an evil-matter, but also if it is the ultimate source of perversion when faced with an evil-matter which is already there (not produced by the soul), but which is yet not the active cause of any malaise or vice, which does not oppose soul in any concrete way, and which simply represents the good at its nadir. It is necessary that evil comes positively from matter (not created, obviously, by the soul), and from a matter that is more than the good at its nadir, otherwise the cause of evil remains a psychic perversion, which would correspond more or less, as we have observed, to the Gnostic[39] or Porphyrian versions of dualism. Plotinus has not then had a change of heart in 51, as he never believed that the soul is responsible for evil.[40] He did, however, feel the need to restate, yet more firmly, the active and determining role of matter with respect to the soul,

[39] Plotinus already formally rejected this type of approach in 33 (II 9), 13, 27–29: τό τε κακὸν μὴ νομίζειν [Gnostics] ἄλλο τι ἢ τὸ ἐνδεέστερον εἰς φρόνησιν καὶ ἔλαττον ἀγαθὸν καὶ ἀεὶ πρὸς τὸ μικρότερον.

[40] It is on this essential point that the interpretation set forth in the present study differs from the analysis that I developed in my *Plotin. Les deux matières* (Paris, Vrin, 1993). I have always thought, and still do now, [1], that the question of matter's origin is difficult to answer because of the ambiguity maintained by Plotinus and, [2], that certain passages lend support to the hypothesis of a generation by the soul of something that it is tempting to identify with matter, parallel to other passages evoking a different and higher, and in some way marginal origin for matter. The essential difference resides in the fact that in my essay of 1993, I had not identified the exogenic character—in fact Gnostic—of the text of 51 (I 8), 14, 51–54, which consequently seemed to introduce, late in the work, unexpected support for the thesis of the psychic origin of matter, a novelty which had to be considered even if it meant having to overcome the difficulties which could spring from this option (such as being *caused by its own effect*), and assuming a sudden change in Plotinus' position in relation to Treatise 33, *Against the Gnostics*. But the scene, as we have observed, takes a completely different appearance when the artificial character of the passage is finally recognized. Plotinus once again regains the consistency which was always his, and the psychic origin of matter, a theory which has never had a solid basis, disappears as does a mirage on the horizon.

to put a stop to the Gnostic interpretation which was perhaps growing in popularity all around him—Porphyry himself in his own way had apparently supported it—more quickly than he might have wished.[41]

Part II. Generation of Matter in Plotinus' System

1. *Sources*

From the previous part of this study, we can see on how uncertain a basis is rests the thesis concerning to the generation of matter by the soul or the partial soul. The two—if not the only—passages which, according to the defenders of this thesis, give a convincing account of the psychic generation of matter, reveal themselves to be in fact highly dubious; firstly, because matter is never named (it is introduced here by commentators on the account of an equivalency of terms); secondly, because the reality produced in those two passages reveals aspects or creates a context which does not fit with what Plotinus otherwise teaches us about matter. Having said this, the text of 51 (I 8), 14, 51–54 remains in itself hard to interpret—must it be read as an unreal proposition?—and its meaning remains doubtful (evil-matter would be the cause of the fact that the soul, which generates matter, becomes evil [*sic*]), unless we consider the possibility, as I have tried to establish, that Plotinus is quoting here a Gnostic thesis (the production of matter by an afflicted soul, according to the standard model of a sickly and suffering Sophia),

[41] Evidently, several other questions remain as well unanswered. Amongst these, there is that of knowing finally if matter is ungenerated, or if it comes from the anterior principles (even if it is otherwise than through the soul directly), and that of knowing how the soul's eventual weakness and matter's corruptive action must be articulated together. Very briefly, and before further pursuing these difficult questions in this study, I can already venture to say, on the first point, that it is indeed necessary to consider the possibility of there being an origin for sensible matter that differs from that of soul and Intellect, and which, all things considered, represents for Plotinus the best solution, since this appearance of matter would then not be a function of a positive and, in a way, 'official' gesture of soul, but of some kind of 'collateral damage' or 'marginal flight' with respect to the system. On the second point, considering matter as the cause of all evil, including the *soul's weakness*, creates a major difficulty insofar as it leads to a levelling of all souls, freeing them from all responsibility, a difficulty which, for lack of a better solution, can find a partial one in the distinction between a *general causality* of, say, a *cosmic* scale, and a *particular causality*. From a *cosmic* point of view, matter would be the cause of the fact that there is, in general, weakness in souls situated here-below, whereas, from an individual point of view, each soul would nonetheless be responsible for adopting a less compromising and degrading way for itself while sojourning in the sensible.

which he himself destroyed in 33, and against which he strikes again when concluding on evil in 51.

It is quite clear then that on the basis of these various ambiguities, we came—like Aesop's fabled dog—to abandon our prey for its shadow, that is to say, to neglect other texts, sufficiently numerous and clear, attributing to sensible matter a totally different origin than the one presumed.[42] Two comments are necessary before presenting those texts. First, in all passages concerning this question, there is no doubt as to the identity of the object under study: it is indeed matter which is explicitly mentioned every time. Second, the appearance of matter is not described in terms of a production, with verbs such as generating [γεννᾶν] or producing [ποιεῖν], which implies some sort of action or involvement of the entity from which matter emerges. In other words, the "choice" or the "will" of the source-entity is not directly involved, but everything happens as if matter, as a derived-entity, was close to a self-constituted entity in the Proclean sense of the term,[43] and was somehow *self-deriving*. Here then is the series of pertinent passages.

Passage 1: 12 (II 4), 15

It is well known that Plotinus considers the two matters, the intelligible one and the sensible one, to be infinite. He resolves the question of their distinction in the following way:

> How, then, is matter both there and here? The unlimited is double, too. And what is the difference between the two unlimiteds? They differ as the archetype differs from the image. Is the unlimited here, then, less unlimited? More, rather; for in so far as it is an image *which has escaped from being and truth* [**πεφευγὸς** τὸ εἶναι καὶ τὸ ἀληθές], it is more unlimited. For unlimitedness is present in a higher degree in that which is less defined; and less in the good is more in the bad. That which is there,

[42] That matter is not an originary term stands out clearly in such texts as 44 (VI 3), 7, 3 and 51 (I 8), 7, 17–23.

[43] As we know, the term αὐθυπόστατον goes up to Iamblichus [*apud* Stob., II 174. 22], and concerns entities of the second order that draw their existence "both from the first causes and from themselves" (Proclus, *In Tim.*, III, p. 39, 4). But in the *The Elements of Theology* (*op. cit.* [note 4], prop. 41, 46), as once noted J. Whittaker, Proclus insists more on the identity, inside the self-constituted, of the cause and the effect than the complementary role of its transcendent cause ("The Historical Background of Proclus' Doctrine of the ΑΥΘΥΠΟΣΤΑΤΑ", *in De Jamblique à Proclus*, "Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique" coll., vol. XXI, H. Dörrie (Ed.), Vandœuvres-Geneva, Fondation Hardt, 1975, pp. 193–237; reprinted in *Studies in Platonism and Patristic Thought*, text XVI, London, Variorum Reprints, 1984). The advantage of this mode of production is, of course, the firmer preservation of the source's transcendence.

> which has a greater degree of existence, is unlimited [only] as an image, that which is here has a less degree of existence, *and in proportion as it has escaped from being and truth, and sunk down into the nature of an image* [ὅσῳ **πέφευγε** το εἶναι καὶ τὸ ἀληθές, εἰς δὲ εἰδώλου **κατερρύη**[44] φύσιν], it is more truly unlimited. (20–28)

Plotinus' teaching, therefore, is that the infinity has escaped and flowed down has escaped from being and truth (**πεφευγὸς** τὸ εἶναι καὶ τὸ ἀληθές), which is repeated twice, lines 23 and 27. But, on one hand, the infinite described here is identified many times as what constitutes sensible matter (lines 17, 30, 33) while, on the other hand, its escape or its flowing implies no specific act on the part of the soul, the intellect or the One. Admittedly, we cannot establish precisely what Plotinus means by this being and truth from which the infinite escapes. Is it the intelligible infinite, or the whole of the intelligible, including the intelligible infinite? This point is difficult to define more precisely, but the argument as a whole remains clear. In any case, nothing is mentioned here of a soul's specific activity.

Passages 2 and 3: 25 (II 5), 4 and 5

We can draw a little more light from the following two interrelated texts. First, in chapter 4, Plotinus returns to the theme of matter's escape. He writes:

> If, then, it [matter] has made good its escape from the nature of the true realities [πέφευγε μὲν τὴν τῶν ὡς ἀληθῶς ὄντων φύσιν], and cannot attain even to those which are falsely said to exist [i.e., sensible things], because it is not even a phantasm of rational form as these are, in what sort of existence can it be grasped? And if in no sort of existence, how can it exist actually? (4, 14–18)

Therefore, we find here the same escape of matter as before, with, in addition, the idea that matter is not *surprised* or *seized* [*intellectually*] (ἁλοίη)[45] by any being. The idea is repeated in the next chapter:

> So then it [matter] must be non-existent not in the sense of being different from existence, like motion: for this rides on existence, as if coming from it and being in it, but matter is as if *cast out* [ἐκριφθεῖσα] and utterly separated, and unable to change itself, but always in the state it was from

[44] This composed verb is an *hapax*, but the simple verb ῥεῖν will appear again in a very similar context, in 44 [VI 3], 7, 30, to which we will return later.

[45] The verb ἁλίσκεσθαι is rare (4 occurrences), and has an intellectual meaning in two other passages (30 [III 8], 9, 21 and 39 [VI 8], 2, 7), while its meaning in 34 [VI 6], 3, 16, a passage similar to this one, is less certain.

> the beginning—and it was non-existent. It was not anything actually from the beginning, since it stood apart from all realities, and it did not become anything; it has not been able to take even a touch of colour from the things that wanted to plunge into it, but remaining directed to something else it exists potentially to what comes next; when the realities of the intelligible world had already come to an end it *appeared* [φανεῖσα] and was *caught* [καταληφθεῖσα] by the things that came into being after it and took its place as the last after these too. So, being caught by both, it could belong actually to neither class of realities; it is only left for it to be potentially a sort of weak and dim phantasm unable to receive a shape. (5, 9–22)

Placed alongside the previous reading, the teaching of this cosmogonic episode is transparent enough. Matter, which, as the previous chapter has just taught us, has escaped from true being, is now described—in a slightly different version—as if it had been "rejected out of" (the verb in 5, 11, here again[46] an hapax, is ἐκρίπτειν). Furthermore, only a few lines later, in the same chapter (5, 28), Plotinus will repeat that matter has *gone out of true being* (ἐκβεβηκὸς τοῦ ἀληθῶς εἶναι). So, all these expressions are related and convey a similar meaning: matter has *gone out*, *escaped* or *was rejected* from true being. We have here then the revelation of matter's true origin. Having been first rejected or having escaped, matter then *appears* (φανεῖσα), that is, shows itself, after the normal procession from the intelligible has reached its end, where it was waiting, so to speak, to be seized by or invested with forms. Its emergence has then nothing to do with what might be called the 'royal road' of causality, stretching from the highest causes to the lowest. It is from the fringes that it emerges; and this emergence is akin to an escape or, at worst, to an expulsion from the intelligible world. Plotinus notes in passing that matter is not non-being in the way movement is. We also know that intelligible matter is itself the result of the primary movement springing forth from the First (12 [II 4], 5, 30). Therefore, the rejection or the escape in question must imply a gap which, from the first movement emanating out of the One, detaches or removes itself from the intelligible as a whole, and from otherness in particular, as will be shown. On the fact of this emerging of sensible matter on the fringes from the intelligible, there can be no doubt: Treatise 25 alone amply confirms Treatise 12. Moreover, Plotinus adds that matter was seized by "both" and could not become in act either "of the two" (lines 19–20). To which "two" is he referring? In all likelihood, they would appear to be, on one hand, intelligible beings and, on the other, sensible copies, as a parallel comparison with two other texts will show.

[46] Cf. note 44.

Passages 4 and 5: 26 (III 6), 7, 7–11 and 13, 21–27
This Treatise immediately follows the one that was just analyzed. It invokes again the type of escape that was under consideration. Plotinus says:

> Since this nature of which we are speaking must not be any real thing, but must *have escaped altogether from the reality of real beings* [ἅπασαν ἐκπεφευγέναι τὴν τῶν ὄντων οὐσίαν] and be altogether different—for those real beings are rational principles and really real—it is necessary for it by this difference to guard its own proper self-preservation; it is necessary for it to be not only irreceptive of real beings but as well, if there is [in it] some imitation of them, to have no share in it which will really make it its own. (13, 21–27)

By its characteristic escape, matter manifests a particular otherness, one which separates it absolutely from all other things and which it must preserve. This explains the fact that matter can neither be fully receptive of intelligibles, nor of sensible copies. This means that neither of the two, as in the preceding texts, where matter was being seized by both, could bring matter into an active state. The parallel between the two texts is close, and always based on a simple fact, constant and irrefutable: the escape or the rejection of matter out of the true being.

However, a little earlier, in the same treatise, in chapter 7, it is no longer an *escape* or a *rejection* which we encounter, or the fact of *going out* or *flowing down*, but the idea this time of a fall, or rather of something more complex than simply a fall: a *fall-by-overflowing*—[or *excess* or *surpassing*]-*out-of* (ὑπερεκπίπτειν, another hapax in Plotinus):

> It is not soul or intellect or life or form or rational formative principle or limit—for it is unlimitedness—or power—for what does it make?—but, *falling outside all these* [ὑπερεκπεσοῦσα] it could not properly receive the title of being but would appropriately be called non-being […]. (7–11)

Hence, we see again what the emergence of matter consists of: an excess and a fall which, from the intelligible otherness, continues out of all true being, right to the bottom, where finally it appears, as the following text will confirm.

Passage 6: 34 (VI 6), 1–3
Treatise 34 is unique amongst Plotinus' writings, insofar as it integrates in a somewhat unusual way the production of things to an arithmetical model. Nonetheless, the general motive underlying the emergence of matter is clear and confirms our interpretative sketch thus far.

Firstly, the relation existing between the two types of multiplicity—the uncountable multiplicity (= infinity) and multiplicity in itself—is suggested in the very first lines of the treatise when Plotinus asks:

> Is multiplicity a falling away [ἀπόστασις] from the One, and infinity a total falling away [ἀπόστασις παντελὴς], because it is an innumerable multiplicity and for this reason is evil in so far as it is infinity, and are we evil when we are multiplicity? For a thing is multiple when, unable to tend to itself, it pours out and is extended in scattering; and when it is utterly deprived of the one in its outpouring [ἐν τῇ χύσει], it becomes multiplicity, since there is nothing to unite one part of it to another […]. (1, 1–7)

Then, in chapter 3, Plotinus returns to this, asking:

> But before we consider that, if there is really multiplicity in the real beings, how is multiplicity evil? Now [multiplicity there is not evil] because the multiplicity is unified and not allowed to be altogether multiplicity, being a one-multiple. And because of this it is less than the One, because it has multiplicity, and in so far as it is compared with the One, it is worse; and since it does not have the nature of that One, but *has gone out from* [ἐκβεβηκός] it, it has been diminished […]. (3, 3–8)

The question which presents itself is how will the infinite behave with respect to the rest of things and, more precisely, with respect to the multiple? This is where Plotinus embarks on a more complex explanation. He first faces the following difficulties: on the one hand, if the infinite must be a part of beings, it becomes a limit, and is therefore no longer infinite. But, on the other hand, what receives a definition or a delimitation must be the unlimited, because the limited is already, we could say, a limit. The only solution would then be that infinity receives the limit, but in such a way that it nonetheless remains unlimited. How could this be achieved? The answer is simple. The limit must encompass it *from the outside without changing its intrinsic nature* which, by essence, flees from the limit: "This infinity, certainly, in itself runs away [φεύγει] from the idea of limit, but is caught by being surrounded externally [ἁλίσκεται δὲ περιληφθὲν ἔξωθεν]." (3, 15–16)[47]

The scenario suggested by the Treatise *On Numbers* is therefore similar to those already proposed in the preceding texts. The multiplicity gone out from the One, which is an infinity, but a controlled one, that is subject to the Law of numbers, opposes itself to the *pure and simple* infinity which "pours out and is extended in scattering [χέηται καὶ ἐκτείνηται

[47] Compare 3, 41–43: "but that it cannot run away *but is held fast from outside and all round and is not able to go on* [εἴργεσθαι δὲ ἔξωθεν καὶ κύκλω], this would be its rest."

σκιδνάμενον]" (1, 5). Also, the link between infinity and evil (1, 3 and 3, 4), and between infinity and ugliness (= evil), is established by Plotinus himself in the same treatise:

> Yet, all the same, the universe is large and beautiful. This is because it has not been left to escape into infinity, but *has been circumscribed by one* [περιελήφθη ἑνί]; and it is beautiful not by the largeness but by beauty; and it needed beauty because it became large. For if this universe was destitute [of beauty], it would have appeared as ugly as it was large; and so largeness is the *matter of beauty* [ὕλη τοῦ καλοῦ], because what needed ordered beauty was many. Therefore the largeness is rather lacking in ordered beauty and rather ugly. (1, 23–29)

Passage 7: 44 (VI 3), 7

This is a chapter of capital importance. It has the double advantage of explaining not only whence sensible matter originates, but also how the coming of sensible matter competes with the standard production model of beings in Plotinus—a production which can be called *cascading*—where A generates B, then B generates C, and every new phase of production corresponds concurrently with a diminishment in being.[48]

Let us begin by quoting a first excerpt, lines 1–9:

> But if anyone should say that the things here which are based on matter have their being from it we shall demand where matter gets being and the existence from. We have explained elsewhere that matter is not primary. But if one says that the other things could not come into existence except on the basis of matter, we shall agree as far as sense-objects are concerned. *But even if matter is prior to these, nothing prevents it from being posterior to many things and to all the things there in the intelligible* [πρὸ τουτῶν δὲ οὖσαν ὕστερον πολλῶν εἶναι καὶ ἐκεῖ πάντων οὐδὲν κωλύει], since the being it has is dim and less than the things based upon it, in so far as they are rational principles and derive more from the existent but matter is utterly irrational, *a shadow of rational form and a falling away from rational form* [σκιὰ λόγου καὶ ἔκπτωσις λόγου].

Apart for the renewed mention of the *fall* (ἔκπτωσις), which is well known to us, the main interest of this excerpt is that it introduces an inversion between *the order of the appearing* and that of *being*. Matter happens *before* the copies, but is ontologically *less* than the latter. What comes logically *after* is therefore not necessarily less than what comes *before*. This infraction against the axiological proportionality of the anterior and the posterior is explained again a little further: "For when

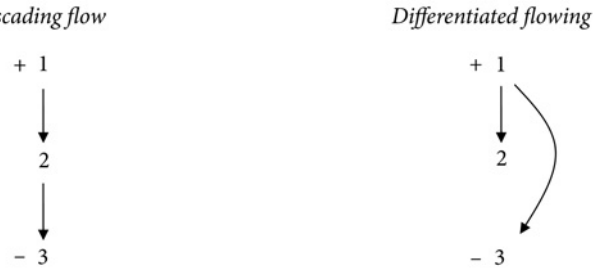
[48] Cf. for an example 33 (II 9), 3, 11–12.

something which is more existent [= the form] approaches something which is less existent [= matter], *the latter* [= the matter] *would be first in order, but posterior in substance* [τάξει μὲν πρῶτον ἂν εἴη, οὐσίᾳ δὲ ὕστερον]" (16–17). In short, in the order of the occurrence of realities, we would have the series 1→3→2; in the order of the value of realities, the standard series 1→2→3.

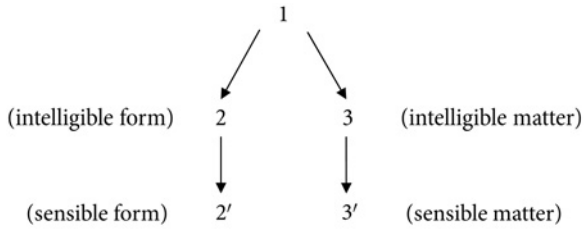
But if 3 comes before 2, and yet is inferior to 2, then perhaps it happens *differently* with respect to 2. And this is exactly what Plotinus attempts to show in what follows in the chapter; namely, how the overflowing of the unity may happen in different ways, and that it is possible that 3 be inferior to 2, not because it comes from 2, but because it is participating less in 1. Here then is a revealing text:

> For each [of the three, matter, form and composite] is different as a whole, and the dimness is not something common, just as in the case of life there would be nothing in common between nutritive, perceptive and intelligent life. So here also being is different in matter and in form, *and both together come from one which flows in all sorts of different ways* [συνάμφω ἀφ' ἑνὸς ἄλλως καὶ ἄλλως ῥυέντος]. For it is not only necessary for one to exist more and the other in succession worse and less if the second comes from the first and the third from the second [οὐ γὰρ μόνον δεῖ, εἰ τὸ δεύτερον ἀπὸ τοῦ πρώτου, τὸ δὲ τρίτον ἀπὸ τοῦ δευτέρου, τὸ μὲν μᾶλλον, τὸ δὲ ἐφεξῆς χεῖρον καὶ ἔλαττον], but even if both come from the same, in that one has a larger share in fire, like a pot, and the other less, so as not to become a pot. *But perhaps matter and form do not even come from the same: for there are different things also in the intelligible world* [τάχα δὲ οὐδ' ἀπὸ τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἡ ὕλη καὶ τὸ εἶδος· διάφορα γὰρ καὶ ἐν ἐκείνοις] (26–35)

The principle of the *differentiated flowing of the One (or of unity)*, expressed in this quote, accounts for the type of emergence which might be involved in the case of matter. The latter would owe its *diminished-being* not to its place in the order of procession, but to the intensity of its participation in a source which flows diversely. Here are, side by side, the two derivative models which this interpretation yields:



Finally, in the chapter's last two lines, Plotinus apparently evokes also a third possibility. To the extent that *there are also different things over there*, matter and form might not flow from the same source. We should probably interpret this laconic remark to mean that because matter and form are distinct over there as well, matter and form here must each occur differently. If this were the case, we would then have a model of this type:



Whatever the case may be regarding this last possibility, the emergence of matter in the Plotinian system, in all the texts that we have just gone over, has nothing to do with the producing or generating activity of a particular entity such as Soul, or even Intellect. To begin with, matter is not *produced* or *generated* as such, but escapes, flows, falls downwards or is expelled from the intelligible. Then, it does not depend directly on that which, in the series, precedes it immediately, that is to say the Soul or a partial soul. As I have mentioned at the outset, in all cases where there is no doubt as to the thing's nature—that is, there where matter is well identified and named—, its appearing never depends on a scheme of generation or production as such. In all those cases, never is the generative activity of the soul implied or even evoked, except in the final lines of 51 (I 8), 14, where Plotinus, as we have seen, presents a Gnostic thesis *which is not his and which he elsewhere attacks*. In the end, there are only two possibilities left that can explain matter's origin: either it falls out the intelligible considered as a whole, or it falls more directly out of its intelligible opposite, that is, the intelligible otherness out of which it is expelled and from which it flows to the bottom. In short, its advent is similar to what we find in Plotinus' Neoplatonic successors, such as Iamblichus and Proclus for example.

By reason of the Plotinian principle according to which the flowing happens ἀφ' ἑνὸς ἄλλως καὶ ἄλλως, we understand that the infinity emanating out of the One, which in the end will oppose the One, happens differently, through an escape or a rejection, and not according to the standard system of production of things, each in turn after the other.

Hence, when finally, at the end of the serial flowing, the last powers of the soul finally reach the conclusion of their descent, weakened and undetermined, they meet an enemy already entrenched and well prepared for combat.

2. *The Exegetical Context*

How could we explain the vigour with which modern exegetes of Plotinus have defended the thesis of matter's generation by soul? In other words, how did the numerous texts which concretely (i.e., objectively) assign an intelligible origin to sensible matter come to be interpreted *metaphorically*, while at the same time an *objective* (and incorrect) interpretation was assigned to the few metaphorical passages which point to a reality that, indeed, shares some common traits with sensible matter, but which has now in fact correctly been identified as being only a *place*,[49] and one which, at that, acts and is generated in a manner wholly unlike matter? We will see that this stems from two closely interwoven causes, one historical, the other doctrinal.

2.1. *The Historical Dimension*

We will begin by considering the purely historical fact. No known ancient commentator credits Plotinus with the thesis of the psychic generation of sensible matter. Nothing supports this thesis in what the ages have preserved from either Porphyry, Iamblichus, Syrianus or Proclus—who, as we know, devoted pages upon pages to refuting Plotinus' position in 51 (I 8)—, or again Simplicius. The psychic generation of matter does not represent in their eyes a Plotinian problem. Not only do they not admit this type of generation in their own system, but they do not detect it in that of their predecessor.

According to Porphyry, matter comes either from the One,[50] the Intelligible,[51] or again from the One *within* the Demiurge.[52] For Iamblichus,

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[49] Or eventually, the "trace of soul" (on which, see note 30).

[50] Cf. Proclus, *In Tim.* I 392, 19–25, *op. cit.* (note 1), vol. II, p. 265.

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 440, 3.

[52] *Ibid.*, p. 388, 9–28. For this same reason, according to Deuse ("Der Demiurg bei Porphyrios und Jamblich", in *Die Philosophie des Neuplatonismus*, *op. cit.* [note 9], p. 243, n. 13), matter would come from the Demiurge and not from an entity higher than it, a doctrine that is not clearly evidenced according to him until Iamblichus (on which, see also Baltes, *Der Platonismus in der Antike*, *op. cit.* [note 2], p. 520, n. 5 & p. 521, n. 1). But the passage from the *In Timæus*, I, p. 392, 19–25, already points, it would seem, towards the highest principle.

matter comes from the superior realities as a whole[53] or, said otherwise and more precisely, is derived by the (Second) God from substantiality itself, as by a subjacent subtraction:

> As for matter, God derived it from substantiality, when he had abstracted materiality from it; this matter, which is endowed with life, the Demiurge took in hand and from it fashioned the simple and impassible (heavenly) spheres, while its lowest residue [= sensible matter] he crafted into bodies which are subject to generation and corruption.[54]

For Proclus also, matter proceeds from the highest realities, and more specifically from the One, as many texts testify.[55] Let us quote an excerpt from one of them:

> In the first place, then, that it is not the Demiurge who originally (*prôtôs*) brings matter into existence is clear from the fact that he [Plato] will go on to say [52d3–5] that 'the trio being and place and generation pre-exists the generation of the cosmos', and that generation is the offspring and place the mother. By these words he certainly seems to be opposing, as it were, matter to the Demiurge after the fashion of a mother and father and to be deriving generation from the Demiurge and matter.
>
> So, perhaps he brings [matter] into existence from another order of [causes], the one positioned above the Demiurge. At any rate, in the *Philebus* (23c9–10), he writes, to quote his words: 'We were saying, I think, that God has revealed the limit and the unlimited in things (*onta*)', from which the constitution of bodies and everything [else] takes place. If, then, bodies too [derive] from Limit and Unlimitedness, what in them is limit? And what unlimitedness? Well, evidently we shall say that matter is the unlimitedness and form the limit. *So if, as we have stated, God brings all*

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[53] *In Alc.*, fr. 8 Dillon.

[54] *De Mysteriis*, C. Clarke–J.M. Dillon–J.P. Hershbell (transl.), Atlanta GA, Society of Biblical Literature, 2003, VIII, pp. 313–314. Compare Proclus, *In Tim.* I 386, *op. cit.* (note 1), vol. II, p. 255 ff. As such, Iamblichus lets matter be created somewhat as Moderatus himself does (*apud* Simplicius, cf. n. 2), and A.-J. Festugière has noted it (*La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégistes*, vol. IV: *Le dieu inconnu et la gnose*, Paris, J. Gabalda, 1944; new ed.: Paris, Belles Lettres (Budé), 1981), writing that "we find the same notion of matter cut out of divine substance in Iamblichus, who refers to the Egyptians, but who in fact is reproducing Moderatus' Pythagorean doctrine […]." (p. 39, translated) Commenting further Iamblichus' text, Festugière adds: "We find here Proclus' distinction between the Demiurge (*Timæus*), who only receives matter provided to him, and the First God, the One (*Philebus*), who creates matter himself, drawing it out from his own substance." (pp. 39–40, translated)

[55] See *El. Th.*, *op. cit.* (note 4), prop. 57, 72; *In Parm.*, VI, p. 1064, 7 ff.; *De mal. subs.*, *op. cit.* (note 3), § 37, 11–18; *In Tim.* I 356, 5–7, *op. cit.* (note 1), vol. II, p. 215: "Because all things are from the Good: things for which demiurgic intellect is not responsible, for example matter, have the Good as their cause"; 384, 19 ff.

> *unlimitedness into existence, he also brings matter, which is ultimate unlimitedness, into existence*. And this is the very first and ineffable cause of matter.
>
> But since Plato everywhere derives (*huphistanai*) the [properties] in sensible things which correspond to the intelligible causes from those [causes]—the equal here below (*entautha*), for example, from the Equal-itself, and likewise (*to homoion*) all living creatures and plants here below—*he obviously also derives the unlimitedness here below from the First Unlimitedness in the same way* [τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον δῆλον ὅτι καὶ τὴν ἐνταῦθα ἀπειρίαν ἀπὸ τῆς πρώτης πράγει] as he derives the limit here below from Limit there above. And it has been shown elsewhere that [Plato] placed first Unlimitedness, the [unlimitedness] which is prior to the mixed, at the summit of the Intelligibles and extends its irradiation from that point (*ekeithen*) all the way to the lowest [reaches of being].
>
> And so, according to [Plato], *matter proceeds both from the One and from the Unlimitedness which is prior also to the One Being* [ἡ ὕλη πρόεισιν ἔκ τε τοῦ ἑνὸς καὶ ἔκ τῆς ἀπειρίας τῆς πρὸ τοῦ ἑνὸς ὄντος].[56]

It's not difficult to see that this description of the genesis of matter does not stray very far from its distant Plotinian model. That an objective link exists between the intelligible infinity and the sensible infinity is a point clearly established for Plotinus, who speaks in 12 (II 4) of the two being related as a model is to its image and even, as we have seen, of a *flowing* from one to the other. Furthermore, the kind of possible double origin of sensible infinity (either from the One, or from that which in the intelligible is different from the Form, i.e., intelligible otherness) is evoked by Plotinus in 44 (VI 7). Although I do not wish to support the idea that Proclus is tritely repeating Plotinus, it is nevertheless obvious that he could feel well at home when reading the treatises 12 (II 4), 25 (II 5) and 34 (VI 6), which all describe in kindred terms the emergence of matter from beings who are really and truly being. The same can be said for Treatise 51 (I 8) where, in chapter 7 (18–19), Plotinus describes the "going out past it" (ἔκβασις), the "going down" (ὑπόβασις) or the "going away" (ἀπόστασις) of matter from the Good. All those texts not only agree with what Proclus himself professes, but also with the type of material generation that all his predecessors up to the pre-Plotinian Moderatus also teach.

But Proclus, who otherwise does not fail to avail himself of the opportunity to criticize Plotinus whenever it arises, does not mention anywhere this presumed doctrinal dissidence whereby, against all other Platonists, Plotinus would maintain that it is Soul itself who directly gener-

[56] *In Tim*. I 384, 19–385, 13, *op. cit*. (note 1), vol. II, pp. 253–254.

ates matter-evil. In the § 30 to 37 of *De malorum subsistentia*, where he is sharply contesting the idea that matter, as a radical evil, may have derived from the Good, the specific role of the soul is not mentioned anywhere. If he had only suspected this doctrine in Plotinus, he could not have been anything but particularly uncompromising towards it. And it is easy to know why. By virtue of the causal regime he himself elaborated,[57] only the One whose simplicity and causal power both surpasses and encompasses the causal power of other things, has the capacity to generate matter, which is itself simple:

> But that the extreme terms are produced by fewer causes is plain, since the higher principles both begin to operate before the lower and extend beyond them to things which the lower by remission of power are precluded from reaching. For the last being is, like the first, perfectly simple, for the reason that it proceeds from the first alone; […].[58]

How could he have remained silent in the face of such a *surprising* doctrine, with which many moderns credit Plotinus? We have no choice but to conclude that Proclus did not read as Plotinian the statement of 51 (I 8) 14, 51–54, concerning the generation—in a potential or unreal mode—of matter by the soul, and to presume that he himself, as other later Platonists, spontaneously recognized this solution as Gnostic. And the same attitude is found again in Simplicius, whose standpoint we will come to shortly.

Now, where might this hypothesis of a hyle-generating soul have come from to begin with? In all likelihood, from Marsilio Ficino himself, prior to whom it does not seem possible to trace. It is, indeed, in the *Argumentum* preceding his translation of I 8 that Ficino, contrary to

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[57] Cf. *El. Th.*, *op. cit*. (note 4), prop. 56–59. This regime of causality, as Dodds teaches us (*Ibid*., p. 231), can be found as well in Syrianus (*In Metaph*. 59, 17), but it is not certain that it can be traced as far as Iamblichus who, if we are to believe the testimony of Olympiodorus (*In Alc*., p. 110, 13 ff., Cr = fr. 8 Dillon), defended the idea that the causality of the highest principles, even though they stay active down to the lowest level, and that even if their power is greater, it is rendered weaker because of their being at a greater distance. It is *mutatis mutandis* what we also observe, it seems, in Plotinus himself.

[58] *El. Th*., *op. cit*. (note 4), prop. 59, p. 57. The same kind of teaching is found elsewhere, for example *In Tim*. I 387, 23–30, *op. cit*. (note 1), vol. II, p. 259: "So, if you wish to distinguish the [different] originating (*prôtourgos*) causes and their [respective] effects, you will say (1) that the Good, being the cause of all things, is also the cause of matter—for which reason [matter] is a necessary thing—and of the production of form—because every form too is a measure—and of order—because order is the relation between the things which are ordered; and (2) that the Paradigm is not [a cause] of matter, but [is a cause] of the production of form and of the order among [those] forms; and (3) that the demiurgic [cause is a cause] of order [alone]." See as well 209, 13–19.

all known Greek authors, credits expressly this doctrine to Plotinus: "*Memento, Plotinus et hic et alibi nobis innuere, maetria a natura, id est, ab infima virtute animae generari*". And he repeats a little further: "*Iam vero anima cum materiam generat, nondum mala est, sed bona, nec dum debilis, sed foecunda, ideoque generare potest*".[59] It is from there then that this conception seems to have spread and to have won over the majority of modern interpreters.[60] Yet, at the very moment he was formulating it, Ficino was already beginning to doubt its validity and thus stated that the interpretation was only "probable" (*probabile*).[61] But Ficino's second thoughts were to be quickly forgotten.

2.2. *The Doctrinal Dimension*

Under the powerful influence of Marsilio Ficino, the difference between matter's specifically Gnostic mode of generation by the soul and the Plotinian model of derivation—or even of self-derivation—of matter by rejection, fall, flowing or escaping out of the intelligible sphere or the

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[59] *Plotini. Opera omnia. Cum latina Marsilii Ficini interpretatione et commentatione*. Facsimile of the Bale edition, Pietro Perna, 1580, (Phénix, 2005, pp. 70 and 71). For the record, Ficino's translation actually dates back to 1492.

[60] Let us note that is was adopted by F. Creuzer as early as in his 1835 edition (*Plotinus. Opera omnia*. Apparatum criticum disposuit, indices concinnauit G.H. Moser; emendauit, indices expleuit, prolegomena, introductiones, annotationes adiecit F. Creuzer, vol. I–III, Oxford, Typographeum Academocum, 1835), in his *Adnumbratio rationis Plotini universae, sive Sciagraphia systematis Plotiniani*. He writes, p. xxix: *Item, anima ab Uno desciscente et extrensicus operante ac se diffundente, nata est Multitudo, et ipsa paullatim evoluta; natus est Locus* (*ὁ τόπος*), *sive Spatium; quae non vere sunt, neque enim insunt in veritatis domicilio, intelligibili mundi, sed obtulerunt se animae magis magisque delabenti, quasi quaedam veri imagines et umbrae. Tandem ubi ad extremum delapsa Anima prorsus deficit, et sui ipsa dissimilis a generando effciendoque cessat, igitur ex haec quasi defetiscentia animae, ultima omnium nascitur Materia* (*ἡ ὕλη*).

[61] *Op. cit*. (note 59), p. 70 (translated): "Remember that Plotinus, here as in other places, is indicating that matter is generated by nature, that is, by the lowest power of the soul. Of the soul, I say, which either suffers, as is written somewhere, or which is in act, which I consider to be more in accordance with the rule. Indeed, as long as matter has not come to exist, the soul suffers nothing, unless perhaps we consider that soul also suffers in a sort of a way, being affected in some part or other for generating something. As a consequence, as natural things are placed under the perview of the divine realities, it is **probable** (*probabile*) that it be the last [degree] of the divinities, that is, the generative nature of natural things, on which depends the subject of generation itself, matter" (*Memento, Plotinus et hic et alibi nobis innuere, materia a natura, id est, ab infima virtute animae generari: ab anima, inquam, sive patiente, quemadmodum alicubi legitur, sive praesente, quod rectius legi puto. Anima enim nihil nondum nata materia patitur: nisi forte pati quis intelligat animam, quodammodo etiam qua parte affictur ad aliquid generandum. Cum igitur naturalia divinis subjiciantur, **probabile** est ab ultimo divinorum, id est, natura naturalium genetrice, generationis ipsius subjectum, id est, materiam, dependere*).

intelligible otherness (a model directly inspired by the Neopythagorism of Eudorus, of Moderatus and upheld by the later Neoplatonists), was quickly forgotten. But once this distinction is removed, it is quite obvious that it is no longer possible to maintain the subtle Plotinian distinction between the final indetermination of the soul—sometimes called *obscurity*, *non-being*, *other hypostasis* (11 [V 1], 2, 26), which turns out to be Place as such (27 [IV 3], 9, 23)—and matter, which Plotinus takes great pains to never name in these contexts. Matter is not something more or less obscure, nor something that *becomes* obscure (*ibid*., 25–26), and not something undefined insofar as, like the last image of the soul, it could have *become more undefined* (ἀοριστοτέρα γινομένη; 13 [III 9], 3, 11–12), but something which, from the outset, is the infinite-in-itself (αὐτοάπειρον; 12 [II 4], 16, 17), otherness-in-itself (αὐτοετερότης; 12 [II 4], 13, 18) and evil-in-itself (αὐτοκακόν; 51 [I 8], 8, 42; 13, 9). It is also interesting to note that in the few passages which have been falsely considered as proof of the psychic generation of matter, what is generated or produced by it is never presented as ἄπειρον as such.

Generating something obscure, deprived-of-life and undefined which shares certain traits with matter is one thing. Generating the *infinite* pure and simple is something else altogether, which Plotinus never mentions in relation to the soul, except when discussing the Infinite found in the *Philebus* (16e1–2), where he writes: "So then Intellect holds the soul which comes after it, so that it is in number and holds soul down to its last part, but its last part is altogether infinite (**τὸ δὲ ἔσχατον** αὐτῆς ἤδη ἄπειρον παντάπασι)." (43 [VI 2], 22, 23) Is this last part of the soul, which is totally infinite, matter itself? Evidently not. It is the exegetical context of the *Philebus* which suggests to Plotinus this unexpected attribute. And besides, the rectification follows soon afterwards, as only a few lines further, Plotinus immediately clarifies: "the last of them [the other powers of the soul, those that are not directed above] is already grasping and shaping matter (**ἡ δὲ ἐσχάτη** ὕλης ἤδη ἐφαπτομένη καὶ μορφοῦσα)." (31–32)[62] The teaching is therefore the same here as elsewhere.[63]

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[62] We can compare this excerpt with 27 (IV 3), 8, 35 ff., where the infinity of the Soul is said to reside in its power, and not in what "was going to be divided to infinity", and where Plotinus adds that, in its procession, the soul never goes outside of itself (μή … προϊοῦσα ἔξω αὐτῆς, 40–41).

[63] Once again, my doubts regarding the generation of matter by the Soul are not new. I have previously maintained that the thesis according to which matter is generated by soul, by the Soul of the world and, *a fortiori*, by a partial soul, can be disposed of. It is an easily refuted thesis and it is simple to gather a great number of objections and claims against

Moreover, there is nothing very surprising if, by the end of the process of the generation of things, going from the One to the Intellect, then from the Intellect to the Soul—a process conceived as a motion of progressive degradation—the last power, truly exhausted, were by nature to be close to matter, with which it would from now on have to negotiate. Throughout Plotinus' writings, contiguous terms show themselves to be similar to each other.

Doctrinally speaking, four possibilities present themselves: 1) matter is not generated; 2) matter is generated by Soul; 3) matter is the product of multiple generations; 4) matter falls out of or is expulsed from the intelligible. As we will ascertain shortly, only the last option is satisfactory.

1) Matter is not generated

Supported by a few interpreters,[64] and especially by Schwyzer, a leading scholar, this hypothesis is not really defensible when we take into account all the passages that relate the intelligible provenance of sensible matter. Moreover, Plotinus confirms a certain number of times that matter is not an originary term.[65]

2) Matter is generated by the soul

Our current demonstration has shown the extreme fragility of this thesis, for which in the end no concrete support can be found in Plotinus' writings, besides the surprising declaration of 51 (I 8), 14, 51–54, which only reveals its full meaning when we see it in the light of the contro-

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it, though there is a sense in which it can seem to be most tenacious (cf. *Le problème de la matière chez Plotin: Essai sur la problématique plotinienne*, doctoral thesis, Paris, Sorbonne, vol. I, p. 198, 1988; restated in *Les deux matières*, *op. cit.* [note 40], p. 161). And so, once it is understood that the doctrine referred to in the text of 51 (8), 14, 51–54 is in fact Gnostic, the "tenacious" character of the thesis disappears as if by magic. It was not well founded from the start and remains so.

[64] Cf. above, note 6.

[65] Cf. note 42. The only passage that considers the fundamentally originary character of matter is the one pertaining to the famous alternative in 6 (IV 8), 6, 18–23, where Plotinus proposes that matter either has always existed (which would not stop it from participating in the Good), or its generation is a necessary consequence of antecedent causes (in which case again it could not remain separated from other things). It is naturally difficult to draw a clear teaching from this text. It seems to me, at the very least, that in any case, the alternative concerns sensible matter (which is also the opinion, for example, of K. Corrigan ["Positive and Negative Matter in Later Platonism …", *op. cit.* (note 18), pp. 32–33], who sees in this text a possible opposition to the Gnostics), and not, first, intelligible matter, then sensible matter, as D. O'Brien suggested (*Théodicée plotinienne*, *op. cit.* [note 19], pp. 37–41).

versy with the Gnostics which structures it. Also, none of the ancients credit Plotinus with this type of generation, undoubtedly identified in all Platonist schools as a Gnostic proposition. The meaning—obvious for the ancients—of this opposition was no longer clear in the Renaissance, and therefore Marsilio Ficino, when confronted with this curious declaration and to the odd text containing an equivocal language, elaborated (not without hesitation) an exegesis which was easily adopted by subsequent generations, though not without encountering some resistances, here and there, as some editorial modifications of the text (by Müller, already, in 1878) attest. In short, we can say that the thesis of the psychic generation of matter in Plotinus is a creation of Ficino.

3) Matter as the product of multiple generations

The idea that sensible matter might have been generated *at multiple times* was suggested by K. Corrigan in an article[66] that became the object of a severe refutation in a study by D. O'Brien[67] largely devoted to this end. Nevertheless, the lasting virtue of Corrigan's article is to have attracted attention to a certain number of texts (Corrigan was insisting then on II 5, 5, 10–22; II 4, 5, 28–39, and, at last, on III 5, 6, to which we will come shortly) evoking an origin for sensible matter different from the usual thesis of psychic generation.[68] The interpretation that I proposed of Treatise 25 (II 5), 5 corroborates the general terms of what Corrigan was then defending.[69] However, even if the multiple generations of matter must be understood, as Corrigan explains, as "three different viewpoints"[70] on the generation of matter, including its going out from the One, its involvement in the fall of the Soul, and then its generation as such by a partial soul, the general picture drawn by Corrigan remains ambiguous. As I see it, the partial soul's generative

[66] "Is There More Than One Generation of Matter in the Enneads?": *Phronesis*, 31 (1986), pp. 167–181.

[67] *Plotinus on the Origin of Matter* …, *op. cit.* (note 36).

[68] This other (intelligible) emergence of matter has also been previously mentioned by R. Schlette (*Das Eine und das Andere. Studien zur Problematik des Negativen in der Metaphysik Plotins*, Munich, Hueher, 1966, pp. 98–99, 107–108), by T.A. Szlezák (*Platon und Aristoteles in der Nuslehre Plotins*, Basel, Schwabe, 1979, p. 105, n. 326) and by myself (*Les deux matières*, *op. cit.* [note 40], p. 194 ff.; *Plotin, Traité* 25, Paris, Cerf, 1998, p. 122 ff.).

[69] See, Corrigan, "Is there more …", art. cit. (note 66), p. 170: "firstly, matter had to be expelled, cast out from the Intelligible […]; secondly, matter appeared at the end of intelligible reality prior to the generation of the physical universe. This is pre-cosmic matter; and thirdly, matter is the final substrate of sensible objects."

[70] *Ibid.*, p. 176.

activity can only be interpreted as a *setting up* (establishing space and place) of a matter already present due to its fall from the intelligible, not unlike what is found in Proclus where, as we have seen, the Demiurge sets up matter already provided from above. Interpreted in this way, the entire Plotinian order once again finds coherence, and Plotinus' *silence* on the subject of matter, anywhere where the generative activity of the soul is described, take its full meaning.

4) Matter falls out of, or is expelled from, etc. the intelligible

This interpretation is the only one that offers a coherent, global meaning to all the texts we have examined thus far. Firstly, it avoids all the complications linked to the preceding hypothesis, while confirming its initial intuition, that is, that matter's source, in the Plotinian system, is higher than Nature. Secondly, it restores the meaning of the various descriptions relative to the generative activity of the soul in the constitution of the sensible universe, thus eliminating any mystery concerning them. Thirdly, it frees the Plotinian corpus of one of its most challenging difficulties, namely the refusal, in 33 (II 9), 13, of the Gnostic generation of matter-evil by the soul and its so-called endorsement of it in 51 (I 8), 14, 51–54. Finally, only it can harmoniously integrate doctrinal elements which are otherwise difficult to explain and therefore often subject to an *ad hoc* treatment.[71] This is the case notably in the sections of Treatise 50 [III 5], chapters 6 and 7, where Plotinus gives to demons—beings who are themselves also eternal, but inferior to the gods, submitted to passions and located between us and the gods, be they invisible gods or visible ones (celestial bodies), up to and including the moon, and which are submitted to the tutelage of the World Soul—an intelligible matter that accounts for the fact that they, in opposition to "that which is altogether pure [τὸ καθαρὸν πάντη]" (6, 39–40) and which does not mix with bodies, can come towards the matter of bodies: "One must suppose an intelligible matter, in order that a being which has a share in it *may come to this matter here of bodies by means of it* [ἥκῃ καὶ εἰς ταύτην τῶν σωμάτων δι' αὐτῆς]." (6, 44–45) This doctrine, difficult to explain in detail due to a lack of other clear evidence in Plotinus,[72] is not so abstruse once we

[71] See, for example, D. O'Brien, *Plotinus on the Origin of Matter …*, *op. cit*. (note 36), p. 83 n. 25.

[72] Cf. for example Theiler, *comm. ad locum*, III 5, 6, 24 f., who writes: "Eigenartig, wie eine ὕλη νοητή als Übergang zur gewönlichen Materie angesetzt wird". But as Theiler himself suggested, this doctrine of an intermediate matter for the demons might be linked

take into account the escape of matter which falls from the intelligible infinity down toward the sensible and in which, along the way, demons would participate.[73] The different levels of matter are an integral part of the Neopythagorean heritage, which, we have seen, Plotinus shares as well. The hypothesis of a partial soul which, at the end of its descent, generates matter, remains therefore entirely disarmed by a text such as 50 (III 5), 6–7.

3. *The Double Originality of Plotinus*

What better means to showcase Plotinus' originality than to refer to the ancient commentators for whom this originality was obvious and who, having seen it, did everything in their power to denounce it?

It is in Simplicius, it seems, that what is at stake is expressed with the greatest acuity, so that it may even be summarized in a single statement: *one cannot be the opposite of that from which one originates*. Simplicius writes:

> But surely, Plotinus says, not-substance is in general opposed to substance, and the nature of evil is contrary to the nature of good, and the principle of the worse things to the principle of the better ones. These are to be divided thus: if not-being, which we oppose to being as its contrary, does not subsist anywhere in any way, then it will not have any relation to anything else, given that it is nothing. If, on the other hand, it exists as a determinate being, then it is wrongly said to be cut off in all respects from that which is, *since it participates in it* ⟨sc. in that which is⟩. But if they ⟨i.e. being and not-being⟩ are separate as two substances, they will have being itself as one. If, however, they are separately transcendent (*exêirêmenai khôristôs*) because of an eminent otherness (*ekbebêkuian heterotêta*), i.e. the Form of Otherness, then they will not share the relation of contraries since they have nothing in common with one another. And if, as is usually said, not-being is produced out of being, just as the sensible ⟨is produced⟩ from the intelligible and the material from the divine as if the ultimate ⟨were produced⟩ from the first, *how can it ⟨sc. non-being⟩ enjoy contrariety with it ⟨sc. being⟩, in the sense of being in all respects separated from it, given that it ⟨sc. non-being⟩ has its entire existence from it ⟨i.e. being⟩? How will ⟨not-being⟩, which has no ratio of either comparison or opposition towards being, but falls away to extremity as nothing, be contrary to it as to the very cause*

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to the theory of the *luminous vehicle* (αὐγοειδὲς ὄχημα) which the souls in their descent borrow and by the grace of which they can join the more terrestrial bodies (14 [II 2], 2, 21–22; 26 [III 6], 5, 26ff.; 27 [IV 3], 15, 1–4).

[73] See, along these lines, K. Corrigan's *Plotinus' Theory of Matter-Evil*, *op. cit.* (note 18), pp. 289–290.

> *that produced it, a contrariety which causes it to be equal to that which was ⟨supposed to be⟩ its contrary?*[74]

In the scope of all that exists, if I may put it that way, it is not possible, according to Simplicius, to find a term of which we could say that it opposes itself absolutely to other things and is "cut off in all respects from that which is". If opposition is absolute, there is no longer any opposition, as the two terms no longer have anything in common; if the two terms have something in common, then there is participation between them and therefore with respect to one another, they can be neither absolutely contrary nor absolutely separated. It may remain that, because one of the terms is being, the other will forcefully be non-being. But then we are in a word game! How could non-being, if it is truly non-being, oppose itself to being? Having well established this, Simplicius continues thus his indictment against Plotinus and those who share his point of view:

> Consequently, these objections ensue for all those who posit evil and not-being at the beginning, and most of all for Plotinus and for the others who start from unification. For they presuppose the one and good at the beginning and are required to make the multitude that results from division adventitious (*epeisodiôdes*)[75] and to claim that evil supervenes accidentally and has no priority whatsoever. As it is expressed here, it ⟨i.e. evil⟩ is even defined in a self-contradictory way. Because it is called a principle, it may seem to be primary, but because it has a *subsidiary existence* (*paruphistatai*)[76] among the last things on account of its departure (*ekstasis*)[77] from being, it is plausibly called extreme. How can such a thing have a contrariety towards the very first thing? And *if it is produced from the first and everything which* ***is*** *a descendant of that ⟨principle⟩, it will no longer be contrary*, for no contrary participates in being (ousia) from things which are repugnant to themselves. If the ultimate thing were said to be entirely separate from the first thing, ⟨we reply that⟩ *in the first place it is impossi-*

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[74] CAG 8, V, p. 109, 5–20, in *On Aristotle's "Categories 5–6"*, A.J. de Haas–B. Fleet (transl.), Ithaca NY, Cornell U. Press, 2001, p. 53.

[75] ἐπεισοδισῶδες, that is, in a non-natural way, contrived.

[76] Παρυφίσταται.

[77] The lesson of the texts is ἔκστασιν (line 5), which is not wrong, but in the context of a discussion on the apparition of matter by a way of *going down out of*, ἔκβασις is more appropriate, because it is precisely the term by which, in 51 (I 8), 7, 18—the treatise which is under scrutiny in this reading—Plotinus talks of matter's going out of the Good, by lining up three terms: ἔκβασις, ὑπόβασις and ἀπόστασις (18–19). The term ἔκστασις, quite rare in Plotinus (5 occurrences), is not associated with the appearing of matter as is its counterpart ἔκβασις, especially under its verbal form ἐκβαίνειν: "If, then, it must exist, it must actually not exist, so that, *having gone out of true being* [ἐκβεβηκὸς τοῦ ἀληθῶς εἶναι], it may have its being in non-being […]" (25 [II 5], 5, 27–28); "[multiplicity] has gone out from it [the One]" (34 [VI 6], 3, 7–8).

> *ble that something be entirely cut off from its own cause.* For by abandoning itself in just this way it would destroy itself altogether. Furthermore, it would not be contrary in this way either, for what has nothing in common, will not have the ratio of contrariety in common either. But nor will it even be the case that the non-substantial (*to mê kat' ousian*) is contrary to the substantial (*to kat' ousian*) […].[78]

Some of the Simplicius' arguments recall those of Proclus who wrote, for example, that "if matter stems from a principle, then matter itself receives its procession into being from the good",[79] or reasserted the Aristotelian principle according to which "contraries are destroyed by each other."[80] However, aside from the fact that a substantial part of the refutation, in Simplicius as well as in Proclus, is based on a (Aristotelian)[81] conception of contrariness to which Plotinus does not at all adhere and to which there is no obligation to adhere,[82] the central question remains that of knowing how a thing may oppose itself totally and dissociate itself totally from that from which it proceeds. There truly lies the originality of Plotinus to which they objected.

Is there any possibility of finding in Plotinus, as if they had been anticipated, formulated answers to the objections of Proclus and Simplicius? The latter notes, as quoted above, that evil non-being "is wrongly said to be cut off in all respects from that which is, *since it participates in it*". But *does* it indeed participate in it? Yes and no according to Plotinus, and it is on the basis of this ambiguity that there opens for him the possibility of both a belonging and a non-belonging—and even of a resistance—of matter *vis-à-vis* being as a whole, to the extent that matter is both inside

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[78] *In Cat.*, *op. cit.* (note 74), p. 109, 29–110, 14.

[79] *De mal. subs.*, *op. cit.* (note 3), § 31, p. 80 (= pp. 211, 7–213, 8 Boese).

[80] *Ibid.*, § 37, p. 85. Compare Aristotle, *Physics* I 9, p. 192a21–22.

[81] Aristotle certainly evokes on a few occasions, in contrast with the contrariety existing within a genus, the contrariety which opposes, as two genera in themselves, Good and Evil, (*Cat.*, 11, 14a23–25; *Top.* IV 3, 123b9–11), except that these genera do not subsist in themselves as, autonomous realities, but are subject to categorial analysis. Hence, the Good is said to have a different meaning with respect to each category—quantity, quality, time, etc.—(cf. *Top.* I 15, 107a5–12; *Nic. Eth.*, I 4, 1096a19 ff.), to be therefore an *homonymous* term, while evil does not either, for its part, "exist independently of sensible objects" (*Met.*, ϑ 9, 1051a15 ff.).

[82] The opposition between being and non-being, of Good and Evil, is based in Plotinus on, among other things, the opposition of πέρας and ἄπειρον, elaborated from *Philebus* 23 c; for Plato, the Infinite is a genus, one that subsists by itself (25a1–2), and the genus that admits all those things which are contrary to the undefined things comes under the Limit (25a7–8; 27d5–6). As such, the Infinite does not bear any completion, or improvement; it remains definitely and totally infinite (24b1–2; 9), just as the receptacle of the *Timæus*, to which Plotinus associates his matter, is unchanging (50b9).

and outside and where, though it falls within the province of Being in a certain way, it is capable *from the inside*, but only as a foreign body, of opposing itself to it to a certain degree:

> For, since it is impossible for anything whatever, which in any sort of way exists *outside it* (ἔξω … αὐτοῦ), to have altogether no share in being—for this is the nature of being, to work on beings—and since, on the other hand, the altogether non-existent [i.e. matter] cannot combine with being, what happens is a wonder; how does the non-participant participate, and how does it have something as if from being next door, although by its own nature it is incapable of being, so to speak, stuck on to it? What it might have grasped, then, slips away from it as if from an *alien nature* (φύσεως ἀλλοτρίας) […].[83]

Therefore, yes, in the case of matter, there is participation, but it is *purely a superficial participation* which does not change the core of matter's nature, which is an opposition to form and to all beings. And this internal opposition is all the more justified, since it is the result of an *escape* of matter regarding which the productive principles are, so to speak, innocent. The originality of Plotinus, knowingly assumed by him and even claimed, consists in opposing to one another principles which are derived from one another, but in a manner that differs from that of the Gnostics, which makes it possible for him to oppose himself to the Gnostic theodicy. How? By the fact that from the top down, the production of things always remains good, natural, and is never revealed to be corrupted or contrary to nature. Let us recall the question that Plotinus was asking Gnostics:

> For why was it necessary for the soul to illuminate, unless the necessity was universal? It was either according to soul's nature or against it. But if it was according to its nature, it must always be so. If, on the other hand, it was against its nature, then there will be a place for what is against nature in the higher world, and evil will exist before this universe […].[84]

It is not right, as Plotinus further explains, to consider evil as being nothing other than a

> falling short in wisdom, and a lesser good, continually diminishing; […]. Otherwise, they [the Gnostics] will be compelled to say that there are evils in the higher world too: for there soul is worse than intellect and intellect than Something Else.[85]

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[83] 26 (III 6), 14, 18–24.
[84] 33 (II 9), 12, 32–36.
[85] *Ibid*., 13, 28–33.

Consequently, nothing could be more contrary to the Plotinian theodicy than this successive diminishing which would lead to the production of evil, and therefore nothing is more unacceptable than this Gnostic theodicy for which the formation of the universe is the result of an evil soul, or a defect in the soul or an activity contrary to nature within it, etc. As Treatise 53 confirms as well, the fault is always in the *illuminated* not the *illuminating*.[86]

Furthermore, Proclus is not justified in deducing, from the fact that Plotinus calls matter a "principle", that it must be a god in the same way that Good itself is:

> If, on the other hand, matter is evil, it will be a god and an alternative principle of beings, dissident from the cause of good things, and there will be 'two sources releasing their flow in opposite directions', one the source of good things, the other of evil things. Even for the gods themselves there will not be an unharmed life, nor a life free from mortal toiling […].[87]

We can understand without any difficulty, and the example of Plutarch may help us to see,[88] that an opposition between two principles does not imply necessarily the opposition of two gods as such, if we understand by that two entities of the same hierarchic level, since the resistance of matter in Plotinus is based on an indubitably inferior power, as we can deduce from the fact that Plotinus compares matter to a bound prisoner (51 [I 8], 15, 25), or from what he writes elsewhere: "The universe is a god if the separable soul is reckoned as part of it; the rest, Plato says, is a 'great daemon' and what happens in it is daemonic (τὸ δὲ λοιπὸν δαίμων, φησι, μέγας καὶ τὰ πάθη τὰ ἐν αὐρῷ δαιμόνια)."[89]

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[86] "If the inclination is an illumination directed to what is below it is not a sin, just as casting a shadow is not a sin; what is illuminated is responsible, for if it did not exist the soul would have nowhere to illuminate." (53 [I 1], 12, 24–27)

[87] *De mal. subs.*, *op. cit.* (note 3), § 36, 7–10 (p. 84).

[88] In one of his most dualistic treatises, the *De Iside et Osiride*, Plutarch writes: "For if nothing comes into being without a cause, and if good could not provide the cause of evil, *then nature must contain in itself the creation and origin of evil as well as good* (δεῖ γένεσιν ἰδίαν καὶ ἀρχὴν ὥσπερ ἀγαθοῦ καὶ κακοῦ τὴν φύσιν ἔχειν). This is the view of the majority and of the wisest; for some believe that there are two gods who are rivals, as it were, in art, *the one being the creator of good, the other of evil* (τὸν μὲν ἀγαθῶν, τὸν δὲ φαύλων δημιουργόν), others call the better of these a god and his rival a *daemon* […]." (J.G. Griffiths [transl.], U. of Wales Press, 1970, 369 D, p. 191). I gave further consideration to Plutarch as a possible inspiration for Plotinian dualism in: "Une anticipation du dualisme de Plotin en 51 [I 8] 6, 33–34: le *De Iside et Osiride* (369A–E) de Plutarque", in *Gnose et philosophie …*, *op. cit.* (Introd., note 23), pp. 87–100.

[89] 52 (II 3), 9, 45–47.

To summarize, we can say that the originality of Plotinus manifests itself two ways.

First, the subordinated principle that opposes itself, as a contrary, to the Good comes itself indirectly from the Good. It constitutes a permanent pole of resistance which at the same time frees itself from the Good, and is completely foreign and hostile to it. But its influence is limited by the *bonds* of the Good that encircle it from the outside. And it is in that sense that we can say that matter in Plotinus is *neither interior nor exterior* (οὔτε ἔξω οὔτε εἴσω), as it is *neither participating nor non-participating*. By this, Plotinus eludes at the same time the difficulties linked to originary dualism, and those linked to a monism in which no real evil can be truly recognized. On this point then, Plotinus' solution reveals itself to be original, despite the fact that it could be said that this solution was already in the air, as we see it sketched in Moderatus, in the *Chaldean Oracles* and, of course, by the Gnostics.[90]

Second, the mode of appearance of matter-evil is completely different in Plotinus from that of the Gnostics he criticized. For Plotinus, the production of the universe always remains a positive act, and the divinity's successive incarnations according to a degressive perfectibility by the One, Intelligence and Soul, right down to Nature, are always without blemish, and free of perversity. In the face of this *positive series*, evil intervenes as an *exterior force* which comes to exert a kind of contraction, as we have seen, on the entire *sacred place*, and which is trying to smuggle itself in and seize what ventures near it. This exterior force is neither *generated* nor *produced* as such by the principles, even though we have to concede that it derives from them. On the contrary, it emergences indirectly, as some sort of collateral damage, by virtue of an "initiative" or of a "movement" which would be that of infinity-otherness itself. This scheme moreover evokes, in the sphere of Christianity, the appearance of the figure of Satan, the rebellious angel, who on his own initiative opposes his Creator, but who, fought by Saint Michael and his angels, is hurled down in the abyss to be chained, thereby freeing the Creator from the direct creation of evil,[91] as it evokes as well this Iranian version of dualism where the evil spirit is itself conceived not as an originary principle, but as a derived entity from God.[92]

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[90] For Moderatus and the Oracles, cf. *supra*, note 2; for the Gnostics, cf. E. Thomassen, *supra*, note 20.

[91] Rev. 12: 3–10; 20: 1–3.

[92] J. Hastings, *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 5 (1912), p. 111.

This solution brought to the birth of evil—a thorny problem *par excellence*—is probably the least unsatisfactory, in the sense that it makes it possible to conceive the opposition of antithetic forces while preserving the unity of the whole. In Plotinus' eyes, it has this decisive advantage—and this undeniable originality—that it preserves the innocence of the creative activity of the gods in relation to the World, a point regarding which he remains in total disagreement with the Gnostics and which permits him to safeguard what he considers to be the heart of Hellenic wisdom: the goodness of the gods and of the World. By this particular mode of emergence of matter-evil, Plotinus avoids, at the same time, the Gnostic scandal (gods that create evil) and the dulling, or perhaps, the complete dissolution, of the reality of evil (a Proclian type of solution).

STUDY TWO

THE RIDDLE OF THE PARTLY UNDESCENDEND SOUL IN PLOTINUS: THE GNOSTIC/HERMETIC PATH OF THE ΟΜΟΟΥΣΙΟΣ

Little progress has been made in understanding the "typically" Plotinian doctrine of the partly undescended Soul, despite it being a cardinal thesis of Plotinus, as Harder pointed out,[1] which guarantees the human soul, while incorporated in the sensible world, a direct and uninterrupted link with transcendent realities. To this day,[2] our research has neither allowed us to uncover the origin nor the real antecedents of this thesis which, for want of a better solution, has been attributed partially or even entirely to Plotinus' character.[3] Not so long ago this doctrine was still being qualified as "strange" by H.-D. Saffrey who, recalling Plotinus' refusal of Amelius' invitation to visit the sanctuaries—Plotinus' purported answer was: "They [the divine Beings] ought to come to me, not I to them"[4]—, noted: "If the soul remains always in the company of the Gods, she can legitimately await their visit and has no need to chase after celebrations to encounter them". To this, Saffrey added that "Emile Bréhier had this very

[1] *Plotins Schriften*, Band I b, Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 1956, p. 440.

[2] To our knowledge, the last study to appear on the subject was that of R. Chiaradonna, "La dottrina dell'anima non discesa in Plotino e la conoscenza degli intelligibili", in *Per una storia del concetto di mente*, a cura di E. Canone, Firenze, Olschki, 2005, pp. 27–49.

[3] See E.R. Dodds ("Tradition and Personal Achievement in the Philosophy of Plotinus", *Journal of Roman Studies*, 50 (1960), pp. 1–7; reprinted in *The Ancient Concept of Progress*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1973, pp. 126–139): "This doctrine was *not* traditional in the Platonic school: Plotinus says it was παρὰ δόξαν τῶν ἄλλων (4. 8. 8). It may have been suggested partly by personal experience, partly by the 'active Nous' of the *de anima*, which leads an unexplained existence somewhere in the depths of our being" (p. 136). The same suggestion is offered by J.M. Rist in "Integration and the Undescendend Soul in Plotinus", *American Journal of Philology*, 88 (1967), pp. 410–422: "It is a doctrine which must originate in Plotinus' confidence, based on personal mystical experience, that a return to the sources of the soul, to Νοῦς and the One, is possible for every soul" (p. 417); and then again in A.H. Armstrong's "Tradition, Reason and Experience in the Thought of Plotinus" (*Plotinian and Christian Studies*, London, Variorum Reprints, 1979, section XVII): "I think it must be due to experience" (p. 189).

[4] Cf. Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, *op. cit.* (Introd., note 3), 10, 35–36.

astute word: for Plotinus, 'our salvation need not be earned. It is eternally earned because it is part of the order of things' ".[5]

The concept of a salvation eternally assured can presumably be attributed to Plotinus, but it is to a much greater degree a matter of Gnostic credo, where the salvation of the chosen is guaranteed by the very substance, called "pneumatic", of their being which ensures, after their death, their return to the Pleroma (= the Intelligible) whence they came, whatever their behaviour might have been in the sensible world. Indeed, here lies one of the major causes of Plotinus' indignation regarding the Gnostics, namely, that "one ought [...] not to think that only oneself can become perfectly good." (33 [II 9], 9, 27–28)[6]

The undescended soul, then, would not have appeared strange to the Gnostics. Be this at may, would they have actually defended this thesis? Certainly not in those terms, for otherwise the link between Plotinus and them could have quickly been brought to light. It can be shown, however, that the Plotinian statement is a transfer or, more precisely, a reformulation of a teaching for which the responsibility can be traced back directly to the Gnostics.

I. The Term ομοουσιος

Now, it is precisely Plotinus' exceptional use of the term ὁμοούσιος which might lead us to the origin of the Plotinian reconstruction. Indeed, one of the only two occurrences of the term in the Plotinan corpus appears in the context of a discussion of the soul's divine nature, in chapter 10 of the

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[5] *Le néoplatonisme après Plotin*, Paris, Vrin, 2000, p. viii. Translated.

[6] Without a doubt, Gnostic salvation is not—or not always (We do not wish to go into the details of this debate at this point)—as *automatic* as both the heresiologists and Plotinus himself would have had us believe. This was noted for example by K. Rudolph (*Gnosis. The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, R. McL. Wilson [transl. Ed.], San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1983, p. 117): "Gnosis is not a 'theology of salvation by nature', as the heresiologists caricature it; it is rather thoroughly conscious of the provisional situation of the redeemed up to the realisation of redemption after death. Otherwise the extant literature which relates to existential and ethical behaviour is inexplicable. Naturally the fact remains that the pneumatic element cannot perish and its entry into the Pleroma is preordained, but the why and the how are not independent of the right conduct of its bearer." J.D. Turner, for example, has expressed similar reservations with respect to the *Zostrianos* text (cf. *Zostrien* [*NH* VIII 1], C. Barry *et al.* [transl.], Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, section Textes, #24, Québec/Louvain/Paris, PUL/Peeters, 2000, p. 484). Certain direct sources appear nonetheless unequivocal, as when we read in the *The Tripartite Tractate* (*NH* I 5, 119, 19–20, H.W. Attridge–D. Mueller [transl.], in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* [rev. ed.], J.M. Robinson [Ed.], Leiden, Brill, 1996, 58–103):

second treatise (IV 7).[7] Stating first that the soul, being different from the body, is "akin [συγγενὴς] to the diviner and to the eternal nature" (lines 1–2), Plotinus continues further on and writes:

> If, then, the soul is something of this kind when it goes up again to itself, it must surely belong to that nature which we assert is that of all the divine and eternal. For wisdom and true virtue are divine things, and could not occur in some trivial mortal being, but something of such a kind [as to possess them] must be divine, *since it has a share in divine things through its kinship and consubstantiality* [διὰ συγγένειαν καὶ τὸ ὁμοούσιον].
>
> (10, 13–19)

We might point out immediately that the soul's συγγένεια with the divine belongs to classic Platonism,[8] and that the term itself is therefore not significantly innovative. But the idea of a *consubstantiality* or, as some would say, a *similarity of substance* with the divine (the ὁμοούσια, but Plotinus only uses the adjective), is unheard of in Plato and therefore a significant innovation, as it implies a ground or a substance which is still shared with the original term, and not simply a common heritage. Kinship (συγγένεια) remains beyond the ontological discontinuities, but consubstantiality (ὁμοούσια) implies permanence with the root. The partial non-descent of the Soul is compatible with ὁμοούσια, but not with kinship, which concerns an extrinsic link. The partial non-descent of the soul supposes an uninterrupted connection of the soul with the substance of origin, and is in accord in this sense with ὁμοούσια, but not with kinship, which marks a new existence, a new *hypostasis*, in the face of its kin, and thereby cancels the continuity. This is indeed why Plotinus, who does not yet speak of the non-descent of the soul in the second treatise, introduces nonetheless the requisite of continuity. The soul, which has the care of a body, argues Plotinus, keeps something that is exterior to the body (13, 13).

The tie, linking this passage with the express thesis of the partial non-descent of the soul which the sixth treatise introduces, has long been recognized. The second treatise is noteworthy as well for its reference to the *divinisation of Man* (10, 30ff.), which is another strongly Gnostic theme (to which I will return later). Whatever the case may be,

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"The spiritual race will receive complete salvation in every way". Compare 122, 14–15: "The election shares body and essence with the Savior".

[7] The other occurrence, in 28 (IV 4), 28, 56, concerns the similarity of the affects in the vegetative soul.

[8] Cf. E. Des Places, *Syngeneia: la parenté de l'homme avec Dieu d'Homère à la patristique*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1964.

Plotinus, in the sixth treatise, carries his thoughts on continuity further with this observation: "And, if one ought dare to express one's own view more clearly, contradicting the opinion of others, even our soul does not altogether come down, but there is always something of it in the intelligible." (6 [IV 8], 8, 1–3) This foothold, which the descending soul keeps in the intelligible, also mentioned in other Plotinian passages,[9] is precisely that which the term *consubstantiality* of the second treatise recognizes and which the standard vocabulary of συγγένεια excludes. However, if, for Plotinus, the soul is truly this entity consubstantial with the divine or with the Intelligible, from which it originates, it resembles the Hermetic-Gnostic soul, which is itself generated from and consubstantial with Intellect, to a point where it could be mistaken for it.

In the Gnostic approach, it is indeed thought that each type of human being returns to the element with which it is consubstantial. Thus, explains Irenæus:

> Those [heretics] who hold the same [system of] infidelity have ascribed, no doubt, their own proper region to spiritual beings,—that, namely, which is within the Pleroma, but to animate beings the intermediate space, while to corporeal they assign that which is material. And they assert that God Himself can do no otherwise, but that every one of the [different kinds of substance] mentioned passes away to those things which are of the same nature (*omoousios*) [with itself].[10]

In this context, consubstantiality guarantees a return of the similar to the similar (II 29, 1), and, as the *Excerpts from Theodotus* states it, the pneumatic man is not only *in the image* of God, as is the hylic, nor simply *a resemblance* of God, as is the psychic, but he is *properly* God:

> From Adam three natures were begotten. The first was the irrational, which was Cain's, the second the rational and just, which was Abel's, the third the spiritual, which was Seth's. Now that which is earthly is "according to the image," that which is psychical according to the "likeness" of God, and that which is spiritual is according to the real nature; and with reference to these three, without the other children of Adam, it was said, "This is the book

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[9] Here is a complete list of passages dealing more or less directly with the non-descent: 2 (IV 7), 10, 13–19; 13, 14; 5 (V 9), 1, 10–12; 13, 14–15; 6 (IV 8), 4, 4–6, 30–31; 7, 6; 8, 1–17; 10 (V 1), 10, 21–30; 11 (V 2), 1, 22; 2, 9; 15 (III 4), 3, 21–27; 21 (IV 1), 12 ff.; 22 (VI 4), 14, 21–22; 27 (IV 3), 12, 1 ff.; 17, 31; 23, 29; 30 (III 8), 5, 10–15; 33 (II 9), 2; [*contra* 49 (V 3), 3–4?]; 53 (I 1), 12–13.

[10] *Against Heresies*, II 14, 4, A. Roberts (transl.), in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library. (Translations of) The Writings of the Fathers down to* AD *325*, A. Roberts–J. Donaldson (original Eds), A. Cleveland Coxe (American Ed.), Grand Rapids MI, Eerdmans, 1950, vol. I.

> of the generation of men." And because Seth was spiritual he neither tends flocks nor tills the soil but produces a child, as spiritual things do. And him, who "hoped to call upon the name of the Lord" who looked upward and whose "citizenship is in heaven"—him the world does not contain.[11]

Consubstantial with God (58, 1–2), the pneumatic chosen is "saved by nature" (56, 3). Said otherwise: "So Wisdom first put forth a spiritual seed which was in Adam that it might be 'the bone,' the reasonable and heavenly soul which is not empty but full of spiritual marrow." (53, 5) The consubstantiality is thus described using the language of fructification and emission, that is, of the substantial extension of the source into its blossom.[12] We cannot of course quote here all the Gnostic texts pertaining to ὁμοούσια, but we will to our attention this particularly clear passage from Pseudo-Hippolytus of Rome:

> as the naphtha drawing the fire in every direction towards itself; nay rather, as the magnet (attracting) the iron and not anything else, or just as the backbone of the sea falcon, the gold and nothing else, or as the chaff is led by the amber. In this manner, he says, is the portrayed, perfect, and consubstantial genus drawn again from the world by the Serpent; nor does he (attract) anything else, as it has been sent down by him.[13]

Despite all the interpretative quarrels which the notion of consubstantiality has historically given rise to, all specialists essentially agree that the Gnostics were the first to introduce the term in their sacred literature.[14] For them, long before the quarrels of the Council of Nicæa, the term did not designate the specific relation of the Father to the Son,

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[11] "The Excerpta ex Theodoto of Clement of Alexandria", R.P. Casey (transl.), *Studies and Documents*, K. & S. Lake (Eds), London, Christophers, vol. 1 (1934), § 54, p. 77.

[12] In addition to the ὁμοούσια, the Gnostics have an alternative expression—not found in Plotinus—which one frequently finds in their texts, that of the *spark of the soul* (ψυχαῖος σπινθήρ), which expresses, according to M. Tardieu [I am repeating here a description from the author pertaining to *An Br* pp. 238, 26–239, 27 Schmidt = pl. 27, 19–29, 3 Baynes], "following the interpretative line of *Gn* I, 26, the Gnostic self, 'man of light and truth', in the image of the Father." Tardieu adds: "The origin of the spark is therefore the Pleroma, whence it descended through the eons down to those who 'believed in the light', the Gnostics. Its arrival provoked a discrimination: its presence brings salvation, its absence deficiency or what, in reference to *Eph* 4, 4–9, the text calls 'captivity.'" ("ΨΥΧΑΙΟΣ ΣΠΙΝΘΕΡ: Histoire d'une métaphore dans la tradition platonicienne jusqu'à Eckhart", *Revue des études augustiniennes*, 21 (1975), p. 240, translated).

[13] *Refutation of all Heresies*, V 12, J.H. Macmahon (transl.), in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, *op. cit.* (note 10), vol. V.

[14] Cf. P.F. Beatrice, "The Word 'Homoousios' from Hellenism to Christianity", *Church History*, 71 (2002), p. 248. The author lists a series of references to the Gnostic use of the term, p. 249.

but referred principally to three other meanings: 1) identity of substance between the generator and the generated; 2) identity of substance between realities generated from the same substance; 3) identity of substance between partners from the same syzygy.[15] With Plotinus, it is of course the first of these meanings which we find in the case of the *undescended/consubstantial* soul, and it is this meaning which will be most significant for us here, even though the second meaning does also come into play, as we shall see further on. In other words, the theory of the *partly undescended soul* is the Plotinian reformulation of the Gnostic consubstantiality—consubstantiality of elect souls that guarantees their return to the Pleroma of which they are constituted—, now transposed onto a scale that encompasses all human beings. There is much audacity in the Plotinian statements such as that one according to which: "every soul has something of what is below, in the direction of the body, and of what is above, in the direction of Intellect" (6 [IV 8], 8, 11–13), or that "it is not lawful for it [the worst part of the soul] to drag down the whole" (33 [II 9], 2, 9–10), or in his assertion that, even if the human souls

> see their images as if in the mirror of Dionysus and come to be on that level with a leap from above: but even *these are not cut off from their own principle and from intellect*. For they did not come down with Intellect, but went on ahead of it down to earth, but their heads are firmly set above in heaven. (27 [IV 3], 12, 1–5)

Moreover, we can sense the originality of the Plotinian position when reading, in the Gnostic *Epistle to Flora*, the statement qualifying the other natures as being non-consubstantial with the divine:

> And now, given that the good by nature engenders and produces the things that are similar to itself and of the same essence, do not be bewildered as to how these natures—that of corruption [= the hylic] and ⟨that⟩ of intermediateness [= the psychic]—*which have come to be different in essence* [ἀνομοούσιοι],[16] arose from a single first principle of the entirety, a principle that exists and is confessed and believed in by us, and which is unengendered and incorruptible and good [ὅμοια ἑαυτῷ καὶ ὁμοούσια].[17]

Furthermore, Plotinus can find other grounds to support his appropriation of this Gnostic consubstantiality such as citing well established Pla-

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[15] *Ibid*., p. 249.

[16] We find only two occurrences of this in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*.

[17] *Epistle to Flora*, in *The Gnostic Scriptures*, B. Layton (transl.), Garden City NY, Doubleday, 1987, p. 314 [Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 33, 7, 8].

tonic teachings, the most significant being that taken from *Timæus* 90a–b, which describes the soul as a *celestial plant*:

> As to the supreme form of soul that is within us, we must believe that God has given it to each of us as a guiding genius—even that which we say, and say truly, dwells in the summit of our body and raises us from earth towards our *celestial affinity*, seeing we are of no earthly, but of heavenly growth: since to heaven, whence in the beginning was the birth of our soul, the diviner part attaches the head or root of us and makes our whole body upright.[18]

Rooted in the heavens, to which it thus remains suspended and attached, we can without any stretch of the imagination claim, as did Plotinus, that the soul leaves behind something of herself in the higher realm and *therefore does not entirely descend*. The metaphor of the plant, as that of the ὁμοούσια, is naturally contrary to the notion of discontinuity: how could a plant be without roots and be without contact with that in which it is rooted. Then, speaking a few lines further of the *daemonic in us* (90c5), and again of our *kinship* with the divine (90c8), Plato notes that he who contemplates must "render the thinking soul like the object of its thought according to her primal nature [τῷ κατανουυμένῳ τὸ κατανοοῦν ἐξομοιῶσαι κατὰ τὴν ἀρχαίαν φύσιν]" (90d4–5), an original nature which Plato evoked as well with respect to the statue of the sea-god Glaucus, whose splendour could not be seen any longer, being covered with shells and algæ (*Rep*. X 611b–e), and which played a strategic role in Plotinus' thought from as early on as his second treatise, where he observed: "whatever [like the soul] is mixed with what is worse has an impeded relationship to the best—yet it certainly cannot lose its own nature—but recovers its 'ancient state' when it runs up to its own." (2 [IV 7], 9, 26–29)

Therefore, there is nothing odd about Plotinus' reliance on these passages to justify his exegesis of Plato (see also *Phædrus* 84 b; *Timæus* 41a–d), an exegesis which, far from being paradoxical, seemed on the contrary to concur with several other passages found in Plato, and which he could defend at liberty despite some of the statements found in *Phædrus* (248 a ff.) regarding the descent of the partial souls in the sensible world, from which Iamblichus, and later Proclus most particularly,[19] drew the

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[18] *The Timæus of Plato*, R.D. Archer-Hind (transl.), New York, Arno Press, 1973, p. 337.

[19] On this issue as a whole, see C. Steel, *The Changing Self. A Study on the Soul in later Neoplatonism: Iamblichus, Damascius and Priscianus*, Brussels, Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België, 1978, p. 31 ff.

essence of their counter-arguments. The palpable tension between statements pertaining to the soul, both in the *Republic* and in the *Timæus* on one hand, and those found in *Phædrus* on the other, provided Plotinus, in any case, with an opportunity to develop one of his justly famous concepts, namely, the theory of the self's multiple levels of consciousness. According to this theory, the soul is not always aware of what is occurring within itself, both on the side of the Intellect (hence, it is not yet aware of participating in it),[20] and on the side of the body and its desires. From Plotinus' point of view, we can simultaneously maintain what the *Phædrus* explains, that the soul is condemned to descend into the realm of the becoming, and what the *Republic* and the *Timæus* set forth: that this descent does not abolish the fundamental structure—intellective and divine—of the soul. The structure remains despite the descent. The soul may come to forget this fundamental structure in the course of its trek, but it can, through repeated philosophical exercises, reconquer *on its own* the awareness of it, since it has never really lost it. The advantages of this approach, over that which Iamblichus and other Neoplatonists will put forth remain, in my opinion, considerable.[21]

Finally, we must note that the postulate of the permanent elevation of the soul does not always entail the pure and simple *identification* or *consubstantiality* of the soul with the divine. Hence, Plotinus is sometimes at home with the more sober language of *similarity* (ὁμοίωσις) or of *kinship* (συγγένεια), as when in Treatise 30, he raises the question as to how the soul can know this divine nature which is beyond the intellect, and responds by saying: "that it is by the likeness in ourselves. For there is something of it in us too […]." (30 [III 8], 9, 22–23) In the late Treatise 53, he returns once again to the emblematic figure of Glaucus, paraphrasing and approving *The Republic*, 611e1–612a4, and Plato's use of the language of kinship:

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[20] Man is not aware of all that is occurring within the realm of his soul, both higher up towards the Intellect and further down towards the body, of all that he thinks and of all that he desires; to grasp and to become again aware of what lies in the higher reaches in it (ἀντίληψις, ἀντιλαμβάνεσθαι, αἰσθάνεσθαι), on the side of the Intellect, the soul must turn its perception inward (6 [IV 8], 8, 1–13; 10 [V 1], 12, 12–20); for the intellectual act is one thing, and to be aware of it is another (27 [IV 3], 30, 13–15; 53 [I 1], 9, 15; 11, 1–8), and there may exist, even in the soul, an intellection before any sensation or consciousness (46 [I 4], 10, 4–6).

[21] See on this point *Plotin. Écrits*, vol. I, 1, Introduction (*op. cit.* [Introd., note 5]), where the opposition between Plotinus and Iamblichus is closely examined.

> We have seen the soul like the people who see the sea-god Glaucus. But, he [Plato] says, if anyone wants to see its real nature, they must 'knock off it encrustations' and 'look at its philosophy' and see 'with what principles it is in contact' and 'by kinship with what realities it is what it is'.
>
> (53 [I 1], 12, 13–18)

It appears, however—and this remains troubling—that references to the *non-descent* are rarer, the doctrine being even sometimes disavowed or left unmentioned, in writings subsequent to Treatise 33, as if these teachings would have had but one objective: to refute the Gnostics and their approach. Once this goal had been achieved, of course Plotinus may have wanted to return to a more *standard* version of the relation of the soul with the higher realities. It is no longer, in fact, the language of *consubstantiality* which prevails when, on many occasions in Treatise 49 (V 3), the νοῦς of the soul is described as an image (εἰκών, 4, 21; 8, 46, 53; 9, 8) of the true Intellect and when what is blatantly declared there is that "for we ourselves are not Intellect" (οὐ γὰρ νοῦς ἡμεῖς, 3, 31), but that we only aspire to it, that is, "as far as a part of soul can come to *likeness* with Intellect" (8, 55–56), a radical enough retraction,[22] counterbalanced only by Treatise 53 (I 1), where we are reassured once again that "each has the whole of it [the Intellect] in the primary part of his soul." (8, 6; compare 13, 7–8)[23]

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[22] On this, see Szlezák's suggestive commentary, *Platon und Aristoteles …*, *op. cit.* (note 68), which we translate as best as we can to: "As the line between Soul and the Intellect is here drawn clearly (in 49 [V 3], 3), and is not erased either in Chapter IV—we look at Intellect with an 'other capacity' (*i.e.*, not with the intellect of the Soul, the thinking discursive soul) 4, 24—, there is therefore no question in Treatise 49 (V 3) of a part of the ever thinking soul remaining in the 'higher realm'. This was not for lack of an opportunity to discuss it, as if the development of thought had taken another orientation, so justifying our not mentioning it: in fact, Plotinus never ceases to speak of the difference between thought which is temporarily operational and eternal thought, where the availability of time at each moment is given as a characteristic trait of the διάνοια (3, 28), while the contact of the soul with intellect is given as limited, as an occasional event occurring from time to time (3, 27 ff., 3, 41 ff., 4, 28 ὅτε = 'a man has […] become Intellect when', 6, 12–16 ἕως 'while we were above', 9, 22–23). In all these passages, the reference to the fact that 'there is always something of it in the intelligible' (6 [IV 8], 8, 3) would have been not only possible but by rights necessary. These references remain nonetheless absent and, considering the very specific issue we are now focussing on, it would be difficult to speak here of a simple accident." (p. 199) Szlezák, we should note, offers a very well researched discussion of the passages pertaining to the non-descent, despite the marked absence of the Gnostic background.

[23] We cannot bar the possibility that the seeming refutation of the doctrine in 49 (V 3) was the result not of a change in orientation but of a tension intrinsic to Plotinus' thought. It is along these lines that W. Beierwaltes for his part interpreted Plotinus (*Selbsterkenntnis und Erfahrung der Einheit. Plotins Enneade V 3, Text, Übersetzung,*

II. *"And, if one ought to dare to express one's own view more clearly, contradicting the opinion of others […] (Καὶ εἰ χρὴ παρὰ δόξαν τῶν ἄλλων τολμῆσαι τὸ φαινόμενον λέγειν σαφέστερον […])"*

Must we imagine Plotinus proclaiming loudly and clearly to defend a thesis that would *challenge* the dogmas of the Platonists? Would the anonymous reference to "others" in the expression παρὰ δόξαν τῶν ἄλλων (the sole occurrence of this formula in the Plotinian corpus) bear the meaning which, for want of a better one, has commonly been lent to it, and which Baltes recently repeated when he stated coolly: "Plotin sagt selbst daß diese Lehre der Meinung der anderer Platoniker, zuwiderläuft, ja daß ihre Verkündigung ein Wagnis ist"?[24]

Here, many questions arise. First of all, on what basis can we suppose a common opinion among the Platonists whom the term "others" is allegedly designating? Then, which Platonist or group of Platonists could Plotinus have recognized as an authority before which he might have felt the need to excuse his temerity? Where else do we find him, in all other occasions where he has shown himself to be original, clarifying his thought in this way? And, finally, what need is there to excuse oneself, or to put on white gloves, if the Platonic texts offer, in any case, a solid basis for the interpretation put forth?

At *Baustein* 172 of Baltes' *Platonismus in der Antike*, dedicated to the descent of the soul into the body, the only traditional Platonist exegesis to overturn which Baltes can provide is a sole testimonial, possibly pre-Plotinian, drawn later from the *Commentarii in somnium Scipionis*,

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Interpretation, Erläuterung, Frankfurt am Main, V. Klostermann, 1991): "We are not Intellect in an absolute and separate sense (χωριστός: 42) in the form which is his; in this sense it is also '*not*-ours' because it is for us transcendentally a ground and a determining measure. But it is '*ours*' to the extent where despite its transcendence, it is always already acting as *our* possibility of thought." (p. 104, translated) A similar interpretation is to be found as well in B. Ham, *Plotin. Traité 49*, Paris, Cerf, 2000, pp. 118–119.

[24] Cf. H. Dörrie–M. Baltes, *Der Platonismus in der Antike*, Band 6,2, Bausteine 169–181, *Von der "Seele" als der Ursache aller sinnvollen Ablaufe*, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, Frommann-Holzboog, 2002, p. 202. The spontaneous identification of these "others" with the Platonists is a *locus communis* of Plotinian commentary, which is encountered in Harder ("*gegen die anderen Platoniker gerichtet*", *Plotins Schriften*, Band I b, *op. cit.* [note 1], p. 440), T.A. Szlezák, *Platon und Aristoteles …*, *op. cit.* (note 68), p. 169, and J. Igal, *Plotino, Enéadas III–IV*, Madrid, Gredos, 1985, p. 542. It is also the opinion expressed in *Plotino. La discesa dell'anima nei corpi (ENN. IV 8 [6]); Plotiniana arabica (pseudo-teologia di Aristotele, capitoli 1 E 7; "Detti del sapiente greco")*, a cura di C. D'Ancona, Padoua, Il Poligrafo, 2003, pp. 205–206.

of Macrobius,[25] but attributed to Numenius (fr. 34 Des Places). This text sets out to indicate why soul, in its descent through spheres, must pass through the tropical signs of Capricorn and Cancer, called the "portals of the sun",[26] and mentions at a certain point that "the soul that […] allows a secret yearning for it [life] to creep into its thoughts, gradually slips down to the lower realms [*a superis recessisse*]." It is difficult to see how this sole text, assuming Plotinus had known of it one way or another, could constitute a strong opposition to his own reading. Baltes offers a second testimony, one attributable this time to Iamblichus[27] and belonging therefore to the *Wirkungsgeschichte*, which came after and not before Plotinus established his position. This only goes to show how thin the allegedly pre-Plotinian Platonic 'dossier' seems to be. One has the impression of being put before some kind of interpretative *usteron-proteron*, the disfavour into which the Plotinian approach fell with the later commentators, with the exception of Theodorus Asinus,[28] leaving unchallenged the false impression of the existence of a pre-Plotinian common Platonic *doxa*. This is why certain translators,[29] being more prudent, gave the passage a broader interpretation, "contradicting the opinion of others" becoming "l'opinion générale" (Bouillet), "the general view" (MacKenna), "la opinione in voga" (Cilento). This strategy however is of little help since no documents can be found in support of such a prior *general view*. The problem therefore remains as ever.

The path which Szlezák followed from the start seems more judicious to me. According to him, the thesis is the fruit of an entirely endogenous Platonic exegesis born primordially from the statue of Glaucus metaphor[30] representing the soul immersed in the sensible world, while yet not losing its underlying nature. An additional fact, noted by Szlezák, must also be pointed out: the thesis of the non-descent appears already *before the sixth treatise*, in the second treatise (cf. [IV 7], 10, 13–19; 13, 14), where Plotinus makes an effort to harmonize different Platonic views and where he yet makes no effort whatsoever to point out the singularity of his own interpretation. Plotinus could not therefore be under

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[25] *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, W.H. Stahl (transl.) 1, 11, 10–12, New York, Columbia U. Press, 1990, p. 133.

[26] *Ibid*., 1, 12, 1, p. 133.

[27] Iamblichus, *De Anima*, *apud* Stob. 1, 378, 19–379, 10 Wachsmuth.

[28] Cf. W. Deuse, *Theodoros von Asine. Sammlung der Testimonien und Kommentar*, Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner, 1973, p. 155ff.

[29] This observation is found in *La discesa …*, *op. cit*. (note 24), p. 206.

[30] Szlezák, *Platon und Aristoteles …*, *op. cit*. (note 68), p. 177.

the impression that he was introducing, in the sixth treatise, a completely novel concept![31] With this in mind, Plotinus' audacity is most likely explained, not in a Platonic context but in a Gnostic one.

The hypothesis of a link between the undescended soul and Gnostic teachings has already been evoked by others on at least two occasions. The recent Italian commentary on the sixth treatise (IV 8) suggests (as an alternative only—the Platonic context supposedly prevailing) that the undescended soul could possibly be linked intrinsically to the rejection of the Gnostic thesis pertaining to the Universal Soul's *inclination* (νεῦσις).[32] This suggestion is interesting,[33] and stands perfectly in line with the Gnostic doctrine of the ὁμοούσιος, the impact of which on Plotinus' thought I hope to have revealed. We might also note that the the same idea had already been ventured elsewhere by C. D'Ancona herself:

> Plotinus is aware of the fact that this way to understand the relationship between the individual soul and the intelligible world parts company with the common opinion, be it the one of those Platonists who thought that human soul properly and completely abandons the intelligible world when it becomes united with body, *or the one of the Platonizing Gnostics who thought that not only the individual souls, but even the universal soul fell entirely and hopelessly in the physical world because of a sin*.[34]

As we see it, the context of all this elaboration reveals itself to be indubitably Gnostic, and is also, admittedly, tied to the concept of the *continuity of the intelligible orchestration of the cosmos*, which Plotinus tries to restore against the concept of the *tragic discontinuity* purposed by the Gnostic cosmogonies. In Treatise 33, Plotinus will thus write: "But if it

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[31] *Ibid*., p. 182. Falling in step with Szlezák, J. Igal (*Plotino, Enéadas III–IV, ad loc*. [note 24]), reads in this "una reinterpretación de la doctrina platónica." One can sense the presence of the non-descent of the soul as well in 5 (V 9), 1, 10–12, where Plotinus writes: "Yet, other men succeed in rising somewhat from the Earth *because the better part of their soul* [i.e., that which has not descended] *guides them, from what is pleasant, towards what is more beautiful*."

[32] *La discesa* …, art. cit. (note 24), p. 206.

[33] Unfortunately, this is only put forth as an *alternative* possibility ("In alternativa, Plotino potrebbe contrapporsi alla teoria gnostica per cui l'anima dell'universo è decaduta", *Ibid*., p. 206) to that which is judged genuine and which implies in fact Platonist counterparts (on which, cf. below, note 37).

[34] "'To Bring Back the Divine in Us to the Divine in the All'. *Vita Plotini* 2, 26–27 Once Again", in *Metaphysik und Religion. Zur Signature des spätantiken Denkens*, T. Kobush–M. Erler (Eds), Munich, Saur, 2002, p. 545. My emphasis. See also note 55, *ad loc*., where it is noted that: "The expression οὐ πᾶσα οὐδ' ἡ ἡμετέρα ψυχὴ ἔδυ [6 (IV 8), 8, 2–3] might also mean that Plotinus opposes to the opinion of those who think that not only our soul, but also the universal soul did not altogether come down. Treatise IV 3 [27] contains passages which go in this direction."

declined, it was obviously because it had forgotten the intelligible realities; but if it forgot them, how is it the craftsman of the world? For what is the source of its making, if not what it saw in the intelligible world?" (II 9, 4, 7–9) The uninterrupted order of the production of things is impervious to "the melodrama of the terrors, as they think, in the cosmic spheres." (33 [II 9], 13, 7–8) This absence of any breach in the procession of realities exposed in 33 is found already professed in 6. To understand this, we need only compare the two following passages:

> all things are held together [συνέχεται] for ever, those which exist intelligibly and those which exist perceptibly, the intelligibles existing of themselves and the things perceived by the senses receiving their existence for ever by participation in them, imitating the intelligible nature as far as they can. (6 [IV 8], 6, 25–28)

> Since, therefore, it is always illuminated and continually holds the light, it gives it to what comes next after it, and this is held together and fertilised by this light and enjoys its share of life as far as it can; as if there was a fire placed somewhere in the middle and those who were capable of it were warmed. Yet fire has its limited dimensions; but when powers which are not limited to precise dimensions are not separated from real being, how can they exist without anything participating in them? But each of necessity must give of its own to something else as well, or the Good will not be the Good, or Intellect Intellect, or the soul this that it is, unless with the primal living some secondary life lives as long as the primal exists. Of necessity, then, all things must exist for ever in ordered dependence upon each other: those other than the First have come into being in the sense that they are derived from other, higher, principles. (33 [II 9], 3, 1–13)

We find as well that, both in Treatise 6 and in Treatise 33, the undescended soul remains associated with the Universal Soul's own permanent attachment to the intelligible:

> For every soul has something of what is below, in the direction of the body, and of what is above, in the direction of Intellect. And the soul which is a whole and is the soul of the whole, by its part which is directed to body, maintains the beauty and order [κοσμεῖ] of the whole *in effortless transcendence* because it does not do so by calculating and considering, as we do, but by intellect, as art does not deliberate, [which belongs to the All ordering [κοσμοῦντος] what is inferior to it].
> (6 [IV 8], 8, 11–16, line 16, my translation.)

> One must not, then, posit more beings than these, nor make superfluous distinctions in the realities of the intelligible world which the nature of these realities does not admit: we must lay down that there is one intellect, unchangeably the same, without any sort of *decline*, imitating the Father as far as is possible to it: *and that one part of our soul is always directed to the intelligible realities*, one to the things of this world, and one is in the middle

> between these; for since the soul is one nature in many powers, sometimes the whole of it is carried along with the best of itself and of real being, sometimes the worse part is dragged down and drags the middle with it; for it is not lawful for it to drag down the whole. This misfortune befalls it because it does not *remain* in the noblest, *where the soul remains which is not a part*—and at that stage we, too, are not a part of it—and grants to the whole of body to hold whatever it can hold from it, but remains itself untroubled, not managing body as a result of discursive thinking, nor setting anything right, but ordering it with a wonderful power by its contemplation of that which is before it. The more it is directed to that contemplation, the fairer and more powerful it is. It receives from there and gives to what comes after it, and is always illuminated as it illuminates. (33 [II 9], 2, 1–18)

The sixth treatise discussing the non-descent of the soul anticipates then, in all likelihood, the anti-Gnostic argumentation of 33 (something which both Harder[35] and Puech[36] already foreseen). And we can only think, accordingly, that Plotinus "*dares*" to challenge, not imaginary Platonists[37] but "real" Gnostic adversaries (among whom were to be found the Sethians, who were, in any case, quite familiar with Platonism), present all around him, and for whom consubstantiality with the divine was a privilege granted by birth. Moreover, many interpreters have failed to understand the intellectual environment in which Plotinus was immersed from his very first days in Rome. Plotinus was surrounded

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[35] Cf. two excerpts from the Introductory Note to the sixth treatise (IV 8), in *Plotins Schriften*, Band I b, *op. cit*. (note 1): "*Die Haltung dieses Vortrages ist eine besondere: ein Hervortreten der eigenen Person, ein freies Reden von sich selber (das nur in der Schrift 33 eine freilich gedämpftere Parallele hat)*" (p. 439); "*Sie ist* [i.e. the non-descent of the soul], *wie ja Plotin ausdrücklich sagt, neu und gegen die anderen Platoniker gerichtet; denn während zum beispiel Numenios (Iamblich bei Stobæus 1 S. 380, 15* ff.) *den Abstieg auf das Böse der Seele zurückführt, und so die Gnostiker, gibt Plotin der irdischen, im Leibe weilenden Seele den geistigen Adel zurück, sein erster Protest gegen die gnostischen 'Schauerdramen'*." (p. 440)

[36] "The crisis [with the Gnostics], had been developing for a long time before coming to a head. It is only little by little, in the treatises that precede 263—or those written soon after (IV, 8, 4 & 8; III, 9, 6; IV, 4, 10 & 12)—that a few pointed remarks come to light, directed seemingly against certain Gnostic theses or exegeses." ("Plotin et les Gnostiques", art. cit. [Introd., note 15], p. 183, translated)

[37] This is the conjecture which in the end gains preference in *La discesa* …, art. cit. (note 24), p. 206: "L'uso del verbo τολμάω ci sembra suggerire che Plotino abbia in mente l'opinione dominante fra i filosofi della sua stessa affilazione, i platonici, i quali hanno sostenuto all'unanimita [*sic*!] che l'anima discende nel corpo: ci sembra difficile che egli avverta coma una τόλμα il contraddire l'opinio comune o le tesi degli gnostici, che egli critica già qui implicitamente e ai quali piú tardi non risparmierà giudizi duri e sarcastici."

not by "Platonists"—he was the Platonist philosopher!—but by platonizing Gnostics whom he considered for some time to be his friends. We might here quote a brief explication of a passage by Puech which remains valid:

> Plotinus (II, 9, 10) calls the Gnostics his 'friends', ranks them among his 'friends' (τινας τῶν φίλων, ἡμῖν φίλοι). Φίλοι, if we try to explain the term based on the use the Pythagoreans made of it (G.P. Wetter, *Der Sohn Gottes*, Göttingen, 1916, p. 63 n. 2), seems to indicate that he considered them to belong to the same group as he himself did, along with his disciples, to the community of the partisans of 'Plato's Mysteries'. By designating them thus, he includes them in the quasi-religious fraternity of the Platonists.[38]

We know as well, through Porphyry, that Plotinus, long before the open polemic of Treatise 33, had refuted the Gnostics in his lectures, where he "often attacked their position" (*Vit. Pl.* 16, 9–10). We might therefore suppose it to be a development of this type which we have before us in 6 (IV 8), 8. Let there be no mistake. In such circumstances, one required a healthy dose of audacity to directly attack what the Gnostics held to be their most precious dogma: their exclusive membership in the Pleroma. There is therefore no choice for us but to choose between a Plotinus who has the audacity to confront the Platonists, with whom he was friends, or the supporters of a foreign doctrine. The strangers here *are* his friends, those same platonizing friends with whom he had dealings every day. Yet, this may not have been, in the precocious sixth treatise, 6 (IV 8), the only veiled criticism.

III. The Unification with the Divine: The Gnostic Variant and Its Plotinian Counterpart

It might now be useful to question the very peculiar opening of the sixth treatise. There, from the first words on, Plotinus refers to himself as "I", that is, he speaks from a personal point of view, and he speaks of his own capacity, as a philosopher, to arrive at an identity with the divine (τῷ θείῳ εἰς ταὐτὸν γεγενημένος). The text, obviously designed to arouse the imagination, has, in its precision and its sobriety, in its *tranquil exuberance*—if I may be allowed to risk an oxymoron—no known parallel

[38] "Plotin et les gnostiques", art. cit. (Introd., note 15), p. 182. Translated.

in all of Antiquity.[39] Its central theme of the identity with the divine or of the *becoming-god* is itself—we will return to this shortly—a Hermetic and Gnostic legacy. Let us, however, for a moment step into the shoes of the Gnostic, accustomed as he is to the oracular genre, disclaimed in the third person, suddenly confronted with the philosopher's account:

> Often I have woken up out of the body to my self and have entered into myself, going out from all other things; I have seen a beauty wonderfully great and felt assurance that then most of all I belonged to the better part; I have actually lived the best life and come to identity with the divine; and set firm in it I have come to that supreme actuality, setting myself above all else in the realm of Intellect. Then after that rest in the divine, when I have come down from Intellect to discursive reason, I am puzzled how I ever came down, and how my soul has come to be in the body when it is what it has shown itself to be by itself, even when it is in the body.
>
> (6 [IV 8], 1, 1–11)

What the Gnostics obtain only through tested rituals following a path laid out by semi-fictitious characters, is now offered to them in the first person, in a sober and reflective manner.

Having just evoked the theme of *becoming-god*, let us now examine a text from the revelations of Poimandres on the soul's reascent:

> And then, stripped of the effects of the cosmic framework, the human [the initiate] enters the region of the ogdoad [= the intelligible]; […] and along with the blessed he hymns the father. Those present there rejoice together in his presence […]. They rise up to the father in order and surrender themselves to the powers, and, having become powers, they enter into god. This is the final good for those who have received knowledge: to be made god (θεωθῆναι).[40]

We must carefully compare this *becoming-god* with that which is found in the texts of Plotinus, who will go as far as to claim that at the ultimate moment of union, we can see ourselves "having become—but rather, being—a god [θεὸν γενόμενον, μᾶλλον δὲ ὄντα] […]." (9 [VI 9], 9, 58)

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[39] As Harder has written before (*Plotins Schriften*, Band 1 b, *op. cit.* [note 1], p. 439): "dieser Bericht […] in der Präzision und Schlichtheit ohne Parallele im Altertum".

[40] *Corpus Hermeticum*, I, 26, in *Hermetica. The Greek* Corpus Hermeticum *and the Latin* Asclepius, B.P. Copenhaver [transl.], Cambridge U. Press, 1992, p. 6. Compare also Zostrianos 44, 5–22: "The person that has been saved is one who has not known about these things [merely] as they (formally) exist, but one who is personally involved with [the] rational faculty as it exists [in him] He has grasped their [image that changes] in every situation as though they had become simple and one. For then this (type) is saved who can pass through [them] all; [he becomes] them all. Whenever it [wishes], it again parts from all these matters and withdraws into itself; for it becomes divine, having withdrawn into god".

This is originally a Gnostic statement,[41] as it can be found, not only in *Poimandres* (compare *CH* IV 7; XII 1), but, more importantly yet, in *Allogenes* (*NH* XI 3, 52, 12; 56, 31–35)—a text which we know objectively, thanks to Porphyry (*Vit. Pl.* 16, 6), to have circulated in the Plotinian school—, as well as in the *Bruce Codex*.[42]

Other writings from the Nag Hammadi Coptic Library give a sense of the widespread visions and ascent exercises of the pre-Plotinian Gnosis. The first excerpt which I will quote, found in *The Gospel of the Egyptians* (*NH* III 2; IV 2)—a book which is liturgical in character—, is a hymn recounting the experience of vision and illumination of one initiate who has just experienced a baptismal regeneration, making him a son of light. He writes:

> This great name of thine is upon me, O self-begotten Perfect one, who art not outside me. I see thee, O thou who art visible to everyone. For who will be able to comprehend thee in another tongue? Now that I have known thee, I have mixed myself with the immutable. I have armed myself with an armor of light; I have become light.[43]

What makes this passage so valuable is evidently the self-transformation which the readers are brought to witness. The mystic sees not only the light: he fuses with it and becomes light himself. This theme of self-transformation appears again in another Gnostic text from Nag Hammadi, again one that bears a heavy hermetic mark, *The Eighth and the Ninth* (*NH* VI 6), where we find the record of an exchange between a disciple (*Son*), who has now reached the final stage of his preparation, and his master (*Hermes*):

> Hermes has already taught him all his *General Lessons*, and all his *Detailed Lessons*. He needs now only to go through the final step, which is not one that simply pertains to knowledge, as it involves his entire self. It is an initiation to the Eighth and the Ninth, the eighth and the ninth celestial

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[41] *Becoming god* or *being god*, which goes further than other closely resembling statements which we can again find in Epictetus (*Discourses*, II 8, 11) who wrote: "But you are a principal work, a fragment (ἀπόσπασμα) of God Himself, you have in yourself a part (μέρος) of Him. Why then are you ignorant of your high birth (συγγένειαν)?" (*The Discourses of Epictetus*, P.E. Matheson [transl.], New York, Heritage Press, 1968, p. 86.)

[42] *The Untitled Text*, XIX, in *The Books of Jeu and The Untitled Text in the Bruce Codex*, V. Macdermot (transl.), C. Schmidt (Ed.), *Nag Hammadi Studies*, vol. XIII, Leiden, Brill, 1978, pp. 260–262.

[43] *The Gospel of the Egyptians* [also: *The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*], *NH* III 2 & IV 2, 66, 22–67, 4, A. Böhlig–F. Wisse (transl.), in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, *op. cit*. (note 6), p. 218.

> sphere, where divine entities dwell who will regenerate him, make him into a new man, directly inspired by the divine Intellect.[44]

This passage reads as follows:

> [Hermes:] Let us embrace each other affectionately, my son. Rejoice over this! For already from them the power, which is light, is coming to us. For I see! I see indescribable depths. How shall I tell you, my son? […] from the (fem.) […] the places. How [shall I describe] the universe? I [am Mind and] I see another Mind, the one that [moves] the soul! I see the one that moves me from pure forgetfulness. You give me power! I see myself! I want to speak! Fear restrains me. I have found the beginning of the power that is above all powers, the one that has no beginning. I see a fountain bubbling with life. I have said, my son, that I am Mind. I have seen! Language is not able to reveal this.[45]

This first vision, as described by the master, is soon followed by a second, received by the Son:

> [Son:] Father Trismegistus! What shall I say? We have received this light. And I myself see this same vision in you. And I see the eighth and the souls that are in it and the angels singing a hymn to the ninth and its powers. And I see him who has the power of them all, creating those ⟨that are⟩ in the spirit.
>
> [Hermes:] It is advantageous from [now on] that we keep silence in a reverent posture. Do not speak about the vision from now on. It is proper to [sing a hymn] to the father until the day to quit (the) body.[46]

However, the *Allogenes* remains undoubtedly the richest source for comparisons. This text is very close, it has been said, to the Gnosis known and criticized by Plotinus. From a literary point of view, this is, once more, a tale of revelation—and even of deification—, where the narrator is Allogenes, member of a superior human race who, looking inward and having thus discovered his divinity, shares with us his experiences. This revelation covers many pages and so I will limit myself to the most significant passage, where the protagonist, after having been the subject of several revelations brought about by a series of successive "withdrawals", from Beatitude to Vitality, from this last to Existence—that is, the three intermediate luminary powers of the Triple-Powered One,

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[44] J.-P. Mahé, *L'Ogdoade et l'Ennéade*, "Notice", in *Écrits gnostiques: La bibliothèque de Nag Hammadi*, J.-P. Mahé–P.-H. Poirier (Eds), Paris, Gallimard, 2007, p. 937. Translated.

[45] *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth, NH* VI 6, 57, 26–58, 17, J. Brashler–P.A. Dirske–D.M. Parrott (transl.), in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, *op. cit*. (note 6), p. 324.

[46] *Ibid*., 6, 59, 24–60, 5, p. 325.

located between the Unknowable itself (= the One) and Barbelo's æon (= Plotinus' the intelligible-Intellect)—, attains in the end, alone, the Unknowable itself:

> […] by a revelation of the Indivisible One and the One who is at rest. I was filled with revelation by means of a primary revelation of the Unknowable One. [As though] I were ignorant of him, I [knew] him and I received power [by] him. Having been permanently strengthened I know the One who exists in me and the Tripe-Powered One and the revelation of his uncontainableness. [And] by means of a primary revelation of the First One (who is) unknowable to them all, the God who is beyond perfection, I saw him and the Triple-Powered one that exists in them all. I was seeking the ineffable and Unknowable God—whom if one should know him, he would be absolutely ignorant of him—the Mediator of the Triple-Powered One who subsists in stillness and silence and is unknowable.[47]

Recent studies have shown that several of the main elements of the Plotinian philosophical system are also integral parts of the *Allogenes* and, in general, of the Gnostic writings (particularly Sethian)[48] There are many examples of this similarity, such as the above mentioned, of *becoming-god* and the procedures of negative theology or the metaphysical use that is made of Plato's *Parmenides* (whose structural role in Neoplatonism is well known). In Gnosis as well as in Hermetism, the link that is instituted between the individual and God is no longer extrinsic but now entails a profound modification of the entire person.[49] And here we find, it would seem, one of the keys to Plotinian mysticism, which might be described as an intellectualized heir to Gnostic and Hermetic mysticism.

The Plotinian texts, indeed, relate an odyssey of the soul that is as vibrant and palpitating, more so perhaps, than that which is conveyed to us in Hermetic and Gnostic texts, yet free of the style of oracular

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[47] *Allogenes*, *NH* X1 3, 60, 35–61, 22, J.D. Turner–O.S. Wintermute (transl.), in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, *op. cit.* (note 6), p. 497.

[48] For a comprehensive examination of the Sethian treatises, see J.D. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition*, Québec/Paris-Louvain, PUL/Peeters, 2001; for the *Allogenes* in particular, cf. the "Introduction" to *L'Allogène* (*NH* XI 3, W.-P. Funk *et al.* [transl.], Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, section Textes, #30, Québec/Louvain, PUL/Peeters, 2004, pp. 104–174).

[49] Hence, I am in agreement with G. Fowden, *op. cit.* (Introd., note 3) when he writes: "As men of learning the Hermetists are scarcely to be compared to Plotinus, nor does their power of expression rival his; but we have no reason to assume that the spiritual experiences in which the way of Hermes culminated were any less intense than those to which Ammonius Saccas led Plotinus, or Plotinus Porphyry." (p. 112)

revelations which is particular to these earlier texts.[50] In Plotinus, the resort to myth is mostly illustrative or corroborative in purpose: it is designed to supplement the reasoning, but never to supplant it. This is apparent right from his first treatise, *On Beauty*:

> But how shall we find the way? What method can we devise? How can one see the inconceivable beauty which stays within in the holy sanctuary and does not come out where the profane may see it? Let him who can, follow and come within, and leave outside the sight of his eyes and not turn back to the bodily splendours which he saw before. When he sees the beauty in bodies he must not run after them; we must know that they are images, traces, shadows, and hurray away to that which they image. For if a man runs to the image and wants to seize it as if it was the reality (like a beautiful reflection playing on the water, which some story somewhere, I think, said riddlingly a man wanted to catch and sank down into the stream and disappeared) then this man who clings to beautiful bodies and will not let them go, will, like the man in the story, but in soul, not in body, sink down into the dark depths where intellect has no delight, and stay blind in Hades, consorting with shadows there and here. This would be truer advice "Let us fly to our dear country." What then is our way of escape, and how are we to find it? We shall put out to sea, as Odysseus did, from the witch Circe or Calypso—as the poet says (I think with a hidden meaning)—and was not content to stay though he had delights of the eyes and lived among much beauty of sense. Our country from which we came is there, our Father is there. (1 [I 6], 8, 1–21)

Similarly, Plotinian texts are almost never incantatory or hymnic, and when exceptionally they are, they are so precisely to highlight those difficulties which a philosopher experiences when attempting to describe the supreme transcendent principle, as can be seen at the very end of Treatise 49 (V 3) where, following a long explanation, Plotinus exclaims:

> Is that enough? Can we end the discussion by saying this? No, my soul is still in even stronger labour. Perhaps she is now at the point when she must bring forth, having reached the fullness of her birth-pangs in her eager longing for the One. But we must sing another charm to her, if we can find one anywhere to allay her pangs. Perhaps there might be one in what we have said already, if we sang it over and over again. And what other charm can we find which has a sort of newness about it? (17, 15–20)

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[50] Cf. Fowden, *op. cit.* (Introd., note 3): "The *Hermetica* are presented as revelations of divine truth, not as the product of human reason; and in philosophical as in the technical texts those who do the revealing are the typical deities of Graeco-Egyptian syncretism." (p. 32)

IV. Treatise 6 (IV 8): Plotinus' First Anti-Gnostic Manifesto?

Opening with an intimately personal description of his soul's *itinerarium ad deum*, Treatise 6 concludes with the determinedly anti-Gnostic statement that "every soul has something […] of what is above, in the direction of Intellect" and that "the souls which are partial and of a part have also [as does the Universal Soul itself] the transcendent element." This statement effectively bars any sort of segregation of soul as practised by the Gnostics. Firstly, it makes it clear that reascent towards the divine is now a possibility for all souls. There is no need here for an exterior revelation, for a guide, or for anything other than the soul itself. It is a personal process dependent on one's own initiative. Secondly, the fate of one soul can no longer be artificially separated from that of other souls (that of a *hylic* soul from that of a *psychic*, and both from the fate of the *pneumatic* soul, as is the case in Valentinian Gnostic dogma), if it is true that all souls are one, as Plotinus reveals in detail in the eighth treatise that is soon to follow (but as is suggested already in a few developments in Treatise 6 [chapters 7–8]). This takes us to the second Gnostic meaning traditionally given to consubstantiality,[51] namely, the identity of substances of realities having the same origin, but extended this time to all souls, without exception, and no longer to only those pneumatic members born out of the Pleroma.

For Plotinus' Gnostic friends, both of these points would have been a sharp rebuke. Add to this the fact that the procession of realities described in Treatise 6 also served as well, as was noted, to counter the Gnostic idea of discontinuity, as all things are shown in this treatise to be *bound together forever*: "all things are held together for ever [συνέχεται] […]." (6 [IV 8], 6, 25) The solidarity which thus prevails between the sensible and the intelligible undermines the basis of the typical Gnostic disavowal of the sub-lunar world. The link between the paradigm and its copy cannot be so easily thwarted or distorted. This is what Plotinus intends to explain in the sixth treatise, and what he will repeat elsewhere, notably in 33:

> The man who censures the nature of the universe does not know what he is doing, and how far this rash criticism of his goes. This is so because the Gnostics do not know that there is an order of firsts, seconds and thirds in

[51] Cf. above, p. 60.

> regular succession, and so on to the last, and that the things that are worse than the first should not be reviled […].[52]

In my opinion, treatise 6 therefore embodies the first manifesto—written during a less turbulent time, when Plotinus was occupied with many other opponents—of a great anti-Gnostic cycle,[53] which itself will only be fully deployed in his second period of writing, from 263 to 268, a time during which he was accompanied by Porphyry. This opposition to the Gnostics, which culminates in treatise 33 (although having been prepared by the series 27–29 on the soul, which is closely related to treatises 31 and 32), will also continue after 33 into treatise 34 (anticipated by an *excursus* in Treatise 32 [V 5], 4–5), and treatise 38, with echoes to be found in treatises 47, 48 and 51. In Plotinus' anti-Gnostic program, the thesis of the partly undescended soul, present in 33, and proclaimed already in 6 (and perhaps earlier), holds a privileged place. Indeed, if Plotinus is correct and a part of every human soul remains above with the gods, then the entire Gnostic doctrine of salvation crumbles. The Gnostics can survive many criticisms but that one is damning. If we unequivocally say that "every soul is a child of That Father" (33 [II 9],16, 9), then the Gnostic message is an empty one. The Gnostic idea of inherent election, as Plotinus tells us, undermines their judgments: "to set oneself above intellect is immediately to fall outside it. But stupid men believe this sort of talk as soon as they hear 'you shall be better than all, not only men, but gods'—for there is a great deal of arrogance among men". (33 [II 9], 9, 52–55)

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[52] 33 (II 9), 13, 1–5. Another very interesting text is found in Treatise 31 (V 8): "This image imitates its archetype in every way: for it has life and what belongs to reality as a representation of it should, and it has its being beauty since it comes from that higher beauty; and it has its everlastingness in the way proper to an image; otherwise [the intelligible universe] will sometimes have an image and sometimes not—and this image is not the product of art, but every natural image exists as long as its archetype is there. For this reason those are not right who destroy the image-universe while the intelligible abides, and bring it into being as if its maker ever planned to make it. For they do not want to understand how this kind of making works, that as along as that higher reality gives its light, the rest of things can never fail: they are there as long as it is there; but it always was and will be." (12, 15–25)

[53] On the importance of this *Großzyklus*, as opposed to the *Großscrhift* proposed by Harder (but 33 can only be an autonomous piece, as Porphyry expressly describes it in *Vit. Pl.*, *op. cit.* [Introd., note 3], 16, 10–11), see *Plotin. Écrits*, *op. cit.* (Introd., note 5), *ad loc.*

There lies, I believe, the heart of the Plotinian doctrine of the partially undescended soul,[54] which is betrayed by the admittedly rare use—but how revealing!—of the Gnostic term ὁμοούσιος.[55]

[54] That it is a response to the Gnostics does not in any way prevent the non-descent from presenting other advantages or from serving other aims, such as in ethics for example, where, precisely because of its permanent rootedness in the intelligible, it guarantees the soul's felicity (on this, cf. A. Linguiti, *La Felicità e il tempo. Plotino*, Enneadi, *I 4–I 5*, Milan, Led, 2000, pp. 42–52), and in ontology where, by stressing the soul's independence from the earthly sensible conditions of existence, it thereby pre-emptively blocks intuitive gnoseologies of ascension of the Aristotelian type (as R. Chiaradonna did not fail to see, art. cit. [note 2], p. 34ff.).

[55] M. Tardieu, moreover, express surprise in light of the absence of references, in Plotinus as well as in Porphyry, to the term σπινθήρ, so central to the Gnostics and found as well in the *Oracles* (fr. 44 Des Places). "For Plotinus, writes Tardieu, such an image could have conveniently expressed both the soul's procession after departing (μέρος) from the universal νοῦς and its return to the One, the luminous source […]; this absence […] can only be explained by its abuse by his own Gnostic adversaries" ("Histoire d'une métaphore dans la tradition platonicienne …", art. cit., (note 12), p. 248). The same, *mutatis mutandis*, could be claimed for the ὁμοούσιος which, in its full soteriological Gnostic sense, only appears once, and very precociously, in Plotinus—a sort of *lapsus calami*—never to appear again, as the theory of the non-descent becomes its substitute, thereby applying to all souls, without distinction, a conception whose origin Plotinus most likely preferred to suppress. But what of Porphyry? How can we not be struck by the Gnostic tone of a certain passage from the *De abstinentia*, where we read: "For we resemble those who enter into, or depart from a *foreign region* (ἀλλόφυλον ἔνθος), not only because we are banished from *our intimate associates* (τῶν οἰκείων), but in consequence of dwelling in a foreign land, we are filled with barbaric passions, and manners, and legal institutes, and to all these have a great propensity." (*Abstinence from Animal Food*, in *Select Works of Porphyry*, Thomas Taylor (transl.), Chippenham, Anthony Rowe, 1999, I, 30, 2, p. 27. Emphases are mine.) As well, the regress towards the "*things which are truly our own* (πρὸς τὰ ὄντως οἰκεῖα)" (30, 4), to which Porphyry urges us, remains very close to the Gnostic frame of mind and, if he does not entirely make his the idea of the non-descent of the soul nurtured by his master in Rome, he does not stray far from it when he writes: "For we were intellectual natures, *and we still are essences purified from all sense and irrationality* (Νοεραὶ γὰρ ἦμεν καί ἐσμεν ἔτι οὐσίαι, πάσης αἰσθήσεως καὶ ἀλογίας καθαρεύοντες)." (30, 6) Let us note, moreover, that Porphyry, holding the Platonic line in this regard, understands the end of man to be a natural union (σύμφυσις) of the contemplator and the contemplated, and that the contemplated is in reality nothing but the intellect in us: "For the reascent of the soul is not to anything else than true being itself, nor is its conjunction with any other thing. But intellect is truly-existing being; so that the end is to live according to intellect (Οὐ γὰρ εἰς ἄλλο, ἀλλ' εἰς τὸν ὄντως ἑαυτὸν ἡ ἀναδρομή. Οὐδὲ πρὸς ἄλλο, ἀλλὰ πρὸς τὸν αὐτὸν ὄντως ⟨ἡ⟩ σύμφυσις. Αὐτὸς δὲ ὄντως ὁ νοῦς, ὥστε καὶ τὸ τέλος τὸ ζῆν κατὰ νοῦν)." (29, 3–4)

STUDY THREE

A DOCTRINAL EVOLUTION IN PLOTINUS? THE WEAKNESS OF THE SOUL IN ITS RELATION TO EVIL

According to Treatise 51 (I 8), which is devoted to the problem of the existence and origin of evil, sensible matter is not only evil in itself, the primary evil (14, 51), and a principle of evil opposed as one whole to another whole (τὸ ὅλον τῷ ὅλῳ 6, 43–44) to the principle of good (ἀρχαὶ γὰρ ἄμφω, ἡ μὲν κακῶν, ἡ δὲ ἀγαθῶν, 6, 33–34), but also the universal source of all evils, including the weakness of the soul. As Plotinus repeats several times throughout this late treatise, the soul that is in the sensible world is "not evil on account of itself [οὐ κακόν παᾳ̣ὸ αὐτῆς]" (11, 17; compare 5, 26–28). This refusal to impute the responsibility for evil to the soul is first stated in chapter 4 (20–25) and in chapter 5 (5–6), which ends with the following reflection:

> If this is true, then we must not be assumed to be the principle of evil as being evil by and from ourselves; evils are prior to us, and those that take hold on men do not do so with their good will, but there is an "escape from the evils in the soul" for those who are capable of it, though not all men are. (5, 26–30)

These preliminary remarks are not enough for Plotinus who, as we know, returns again to the subject of the soul's weakness in chapter 14, where it constitutes the main topic of the discussion. Twice in this chapter (lines 21–22 and 44–45), the soul's weakness is tied directly to the fall of the soul. In the first instance, Plotinus specifies that the soul's weakness concerns only souls that have fallen: "weakness must be in the souls which have fallen (ἐν ταῖς πεσούσαις εἶναι τὴν ἀσθένειαν)" (14, 21–22). He indicates that for these souls, which are not pure, weakness is caused by an *addition*, an "alien presence [ἀλλοτρίου παρουσία]"; it is therefore due to something which comes to it from outside, and not to a lack which would have its source in the soul itself (14, 23–24). However, is not yet clear in this initial development what might be the exact nature of this connection between the soul's *fall* and the soul's *weakness*. Is the one the cause of the other, or are they both caused by something else? In order to grasp the answer to this question, we must focus upon the argument's second development. Bearing in mind that there are souls which remain

separate from matter, but that the powers of the soul are many, and that there is a beginning as well as an intermediate and a final term of the soul, matter will come into play at the soul's periphery, so to speak, *from underneath and as from outside of it*, but trying, as it were, to pass into the interior and to corrupt that to which it is adjoined:

> But there are many powers of soul, and it has a beginning, a middle and an end; and matter is there, and begs it and, we may say, bothers it and wants to come right inside. "*All the place is holy*," and there is nothing which is without a share of soul. So matter spreads itself out under soul and is illumined, and cannot grasp the source from which its light comes: that source cannot endure matter though it is there, because its evil makes it unable to see. Matter darkens the illumination, the light from that source, by mixture with itself, and weakens it by itself offering it the opportunity of generation and the reason for coming to matter; for it would not have come to what was not present. *This is the fall of the soul, to come in this way to matter and to become weak*, because all its powers do not come into action; matter hinders them from coming by occupying the place which soul holds and producing a kind of cramped condition, and making evil what it has got hold of by a sort of theft—until soul manages to escape back to its higher state. So matter is the cause of the soul's weakness and vice: it is then itself evil before soul and is primary evil. (14, 34–51)

The fall of the soul therefore consists precisely in this: *to come toward matter and to become weak* during this "coming". This "weakening" is provoked by matter itself which, by both its occupation of place (τόπος) and its attempts to seize the soul, hinders the free operation of the soul's powers. Without matter, the soul, even if diminished, would not have fallen and would not have been weakened, simply because it would have neither had a place to fall nor something which might cause its weakness. According to what Plotinus has already stated in this chapter, evil comes entirely *from outside*, through both the presence of matter and the disturbances caused by it. This analysis is in agreement with the postulate, established earlier in the treatise, according to which a *deficiency* or a *lack* (ἔλλειμα, ἔλλειψις) is not yet evil itself. In contrast with the pure soul, which remains turned toward Intellect, the soul which proceeds outside of itself is certainly less complete or less perfect (4, 28 ff.); it is, one might say, because of its relative deficiency, corruptibility or susceptibility to vice, that it is able to receive evil secondarily into itself, and yet not be evil in and of itself. In short, "evil is not in any sort of deficiency but in absolute deficiency" (5, 5–6). Already at this point, the active and determining role of matter is fully revealed. It is matter, and matter alone, which "is so evil that it infects with its own

evil that which is not in it but only directs its gaze to it" and it is also matter which "makes everything which comes into contact with it in any way to be like itself" (4, 21–22 and 24–25).[1] The soul that does not remain above, and is therefore deficient, only furnishes a fertile ground for the flourishing of evil; it is what "receives evil" (4, 8–9). Consequently, Plotinus insists that even if we are deficient, we are not the principle of evil, which emerges from matter and not from the gods (6, 2). The entire world above, down to our own souls, is therefore exonerated from responsibility for the production of evil. Evil is thus oriented *from the bottom up*, not *from the top down*; it is essentially an *ascending* and not a *descending* phenomenon.

This teaching is both complex and innovative. Evidently, the idea that matter is evil, and even evil-in-itself, is not new.[2] Furthermore, the idea that there is an evil that is added to soul from the outside is not only an old idea, but apparently one of Plotinus' longest standing ideas[3] But the idea that the soul's weakness and fall are themselves caused by matter alone is not clearly expressed until Treatise 51, and it indeed contradicts earlier, explicit statements granting the soul at least partial responsibility for evil, in accordance with the model inherited from the *Phædrus* (246 a; 248 c). Above all, one might consider Treatise 6 (IV 8), where the harm which the soul suffers from embodiment is viewed as a *consequence* of "losing its wings" and not as its cause: "Now when a soul does this for a long time, flying from the All and standing apart in distinctness, and does not look toward the intelligible, it has become a part and is *isolated and weak* […]. Here the "moulting", as it is called, happens to it, and the being in the fetters of the body […]." (4, 12–23). In Treatise 5 (V 9), 2, 19–20, Plotinus points to the existence of an ugly soul, in contrast to a beautiful soul, one which is thoughtful. In Treatise 10 (V 1), he writes without hesitation that "The beginning of evil for them [*i.e.*, souls] was audacity and coming to birth and the first otherness and the wishing to belong to themselves." (1, 3–5)

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[1] Compare 51 (I 8), 8, 18–20: "For matter masters what is imaged in it and corrupts and destroys it by applying its own nature which is contrary to form." Clearly, matter is here not only the necessary cause but the sufficient cause of evil. For a criticism of the opposite thesis, as it is defended by D. O'Brien (in our view unsupported by the more explicit statements of Plotinus), see Study 1.

[2] Cf. 12 (II 4), 16, 16; 26 (III 6), 11, 28–29; 41–43; 38 (VI 7), 28, 12; 47 (III 2), 15, 9.

[3] 1 (I 6), 5, 31–34; 2 (IV 7), 10, 11–12: "ὡς προσθῆναι τὰ κακὰ τῇ ψυχῇ καὶ ἄλλοθεν"; 33 (II 9), 17, 3; 51 (I 8), 5, 17; 8, 20; 14, 24; 52 (II 3), 8, 14–15; 53 (I 1), 12.

How, then, might we explain this sudden shift? Is Plotinus inconsistent in his understanding of evil, changing his position haphazardly to accommodate each successive treatise,[4] or has his understanding simply evolved on this fundamental doctrinal point, for reasons that remain undiscovered? And if indeed the latter case is true, just how far back can we reasonably situate this change of perspective?

Some key elements of the argument in Treatise 51 might set us on the trail of a solution. These elements can be summarized as follows: (a) evil does not come from us but is anterior to souls and resides in matter; (b) evil does not come from the gods, whether visible (*i.e.*, the stars) or invisible; (c) to be incomplete or less perfect is not evil in itself, since, as we saw above, "evil is not in any sort of deficiency, but in absolute deficiency" (51, 5, 5–6). Now, these three theses, as we shall see, stand in direct contrast with those Plotinus attributes to the Gnostics in Treatise 33.

Let us first consider the principle according to which evil does not consist in a partial deficiency, but a radical one. This principle finds its contrary in a statement by Plotinus concerning the Gnostics, where he writes that they "consider evil as [nothing other] than a falling short in wisdom, and a lesser good, continually diminishing [τό τε κακὸν μὴ νομίζειν [the Gnostics] ἄλλο τι ἢ τὸ ἐνδεέστερον εἰς φρόνησιν καὶ ἔλαττον ἀγαθὸν καὶ ἀεὶ πρὸς τὸ μικρότερον]" (33 [II 9], 13, 27–29). Plotinus follows this by immediately showing us the disastrous consequences of this Gnostic postulate:

> [it is] as if one were to say that nature was evil because it is not perception, and that the principle of perception was evil because it is not reason. Otherwise, they will be compelled to say that there are evils in the higher world too: for there soul is worse than intellect and intellect worse than Something Else. (30–33)

To consider ontological inferiority as an evil is *ipso facto* to place the responsibility for evil on the very principles from which ontological

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[4] This was E. Schröder's opinion, expressed long ago in *Plotins Abhandlung Πόθεν τὰ κακά* (*Enn. I 8*) (Inaugural-Dissertation [Rostock], Borna-Leipzig, Robert Noske, 1916, p. 178, n. 5): "Nur darauf sei hingewiesen, daß nie ein unbildhaftes, klares Resultat erreicht wird, und daß Plotin in diesem Punkt nicht ganz davon freizusprechen ist, daß er, allerdings von einern argen Dilemma hin- und hergezerrt, seinen Mantel nach dem Winde hängt: Fordert der Zusammenhang eine Art Schuld der Seele, so neigt die Wage mehr nach jener Seite; wir hören von einem Willen zum Schlechten bei der Seele und dergl. Ist der Zusammenhang entgegengesetzter Art, so sinkt die andere Schale, und wir erfahren von zersetzenden Einflüssen der bösen Materie und Ähnlichem."

hierarchy originates, and thus to contaminate the whole of reality. This castigation of the Gnostics is then an affirmation of points (a) and (b) above. The descent of being from the first principle must thus be viewed as something other than an evil, whence the prudent distinction which Plotinus will henceforth maintain: "a thing which is only slightly deficient in good is not evil, for it can still be perfect on the level of its own nature." (51 [I 8], 5, 6–8)

The same conclusion emerges as Plotinus examines the Gnostic theory of the illumination of obscurity, which he criticized in the preceding chapter. Here we read that:

> For their "illumination of the darkness," if it is investigated, will make them admit the true causes of the universe. For why was it necessary for the soul to illuminate, unless the necessity was universal? It was either according to soul's nature or against it. But if it was according to its nature, it must always be so. If, on the other hand, it was against its nature, then there will be a place for what is against nature in the higher world, and *evil will exist before this universe*, and the universe will not be responsible for evil, but the higher world will be the cause of evil for this world, and evil will not come from the world here to the soul, *but from the soul to the world here*; and the course of the argument will lead to the attribution of responsibility for the universe to the first principles: and if the universe, then also the matter, from which the universe on this hypothesis would have emerged. For the soul which declined saw, they say (φάσιν, line 41), and illuminated the darkness already in existence. Where, then, did the darkness come from? If they are going to say (φήσουσιν, line 42) that the soul made it when it declined, there was obviously nowhere for it to decline to, and the darkness itself was not responsible for the decline, *but the soul's own nature. But this is the same as attributing the responsibility to pre-existing necessities; so the responsibility goes back to the first principles* (33 [II 9], 12, 30–44).

If the production of realities was to be *against nature* (παρὰ φύσιν), evil's explanatory model would not be that of an *ascent*, but of a *descent*, and evil would move not from the world in the direction of the soul, but from the soul to this world, which is inadmissible for Plotinus. This is why, on the one hand, the degradation involved in emanation cannot be considered an evil, even if it is understood that the most degraded stage of reality turns out to be the one which, by definition, shows itself to be the most sensitive to the action of primary evil. In order not to fall into his adversaries' difficulties, Plotinus was thus required to minimize—indeed, to eradicate entirely from his language—any references to a psychical source of evil.

Thus, our hypothesis is that the debate against the Gnostics forced Plotinus, in the treatises posterior to Treatise 33, to insist henceforth

upon the material genealogy of evil, which had always been considered to be *important* in the earlier treatises, but never *exclusive*. This would represent a definite reworking of his earlier doctrine.

For additional evidence of this, we may turn to the important Treatise 52 (II 3), which Porphyry entitled *Whether the Stars are Causes*. Here, Plotinus not only refers several times to the *extrinsic* character of evil (8, 15; 9, 20–21; 12, 9–11; 16, 27–29; 17, 18), but also confronts us once more with this fundamental alternative: either evil is an effect of matter, or it is already inscribed in the λόγοι from the soul. The latter is a fundamentally intolerable hypothesis for Plotinus, who writes that "But if this is so, then we shall be asserting that the reasons [λόγους] are the causes of evil, though in the arts and their principles there is no error and nothing contrary to the art [παρὰ τὴν τέχην] or any corruption of the work of art." (16, 38–41) How, under these conditions, are we to explain the emergence of evil? Plotinus responds in this way:

> The forming principle [λόγος] compels the better things to exist and shapes them; the things which are not so [*i.e.*, good] are present *potentially* in the principles [λόγοις], but *actually* in what comes to be; there is no need then any more for soul to make or to stir up the reasons [λόγους] *as matter already, by its disturbance of what derives from the primordial reasons* [λόγων],[5] *produces also its own effects, the worse things*; though it is none the less overruled towards the production of the better. So there is one universe composed of all the things that have come to be, differently in each of these two ways, and that exist differently again in the forming principles [λόγοις]. (16, 46–54)

This passage is of interest to us, for it shows that without the intervention of matter, the inferior and imperfect λόγοι of the soul would remain simply what they are: things worse in *potentiality* and not in *actuality*. Only matter can make what is potentially evil become effectively evil. The roles here seem to be split along the same lines as those in Treatise 51. The soul is a manifold potentiality, possessing a beginning, a middle, and

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[5] Here we read "τῶν ἐκ τῶν", in agreement with the wQ lesson (as did previously Creuzer then Bréhier), as it seems absolutely necessary to tie the notion of upheaval (τῷ σεισμῷ) to the material element (the neighbouring expression of ὁ σεισμὸς τοῦ σώματου appears in 26 [III 6], 4, 25). The idea that an upheaval might be provoked by primordial reasons would make just about as much sense as the idea of a light produced by material obscurity!

The term σεισμῷ (as the corresponding verb), is often associated by Plato to the activity of the receptacle, the mother or the nurse of generation in *Timæus* 52e–53a. Besides, matter's counter-activity in the process is clearly exposed by the rest of the sentence: ἤδη τῆς ὕλης … καὶ τὰ παῤ αὐτῆς ποιούσης τὰ χείρω (lines 50–52).

an end. At its term, where it is naturally inferior and less accomplished, the soul is a more fertile ground for vice, which it possesses potentiality and which only matter can actualize. Without the action of matter, the potency is not yet truly a weakness and an evil, but simply the result of the progressive descent. In Treatise 51 (I 8) 14, 45–46, as we have seen, Plotinus explained that the soul, at a certain point, does not have all its powers ready for action, being hindered by the matter which occupies its space. Thus, the cause of the soul's weakness is this incapacity of the soul, on account of matter, to continue to activate its potentiality. Accordingly, Treatise 52 (II 3) describes how something in the soul is potentially evil insofar as it is subject to the perturbations of matter.

We find the same teaching again in Treatise 53 [I 1], 12, where, employing the comparison with the sea-god Glaucus, whose initial form is no longer recognizable because of the defects that have been added to it,[6] Plotinus concludes that the source of sin does not reside in that which *illuminates* but in that which is *illuminated*: "And how is this inclination not a sin? If the inclination is an illumination directed to what is below, it is not a sin; *it is what is illuminated which is responsible* (ἀλλ' αἴτιον τὸ ἐλλαμπόμενον), *for if it did not exist the soul would have nowhere to illuminate*." (12, 24–27) The passage is the parallel of Treatise 51 (I 8), 14, 53–54, where Plotinus write that the "soul would not have come to it [matter] unless its presence had given soul the occasion of coming to birth." In both cases, it is always a question of avoiding the Gnostic position, which consists in "*attributing the responsibility to pre-existing necessities*" (33 [II 9], 12, 44).

Was Plotinus of a different opinion in Treatise 47 (III 2), 5, 25–26, when he suggested that we must consider evil to be a lack of good: "in general, we must define evil as a falling short of good (ὅλως δὲ τὸ κακὸν ἔλλειψιν ἀγαθοῦ θετέον)", a formula which apparently represents a view that is the opposite of that taught in chapter 5 of Treatise 51? I do not think so. In fact, Plotinus is here employing a commonly accepted formulation, and hence we have the ὅλως, with which the sentence begins; but his true opinion quickly becomes clear when he declares that "there must be a falling short of good here below, because the good is in something else [i.e., *in* matter]. This something else, then, in which the good is, since it is other than good, *produces the falling short* (ποιεῖ τὴν ἔλλειψιν); for it is not good" (5, 26–39). Thus, here again the cause of

[6] Plato, *Republic*, X 611d7–612a5.

deficiency is to be found below, matter being not only evil, but that which produces a *lack* in other entities as well.

As we know, the exegesis of Plato on the subject of evil has often been divided between two rival camps. Some interpreters want defect and evil to have a sensible origin in the receptacle or in corporeal reality (this is basically the teaching of *Phædo* 65 a ff., *Theætetus* 176 a, *Timæus* 52d4–53b5, *Statesman*, 273b4–c2, and *Republic* X 611d7–612a5); while others trace evil back to the presence of an evil World-soul (*Laws* 896e5–6), and hold the descent of souls into the sensible to be the result of a weakness within the soul itself (*Phædrus* 246 c; 248 c). In any case, whether the fault falls to matter and the body, or to an initial weakness of the soul, the sensible world is constantly made the object of a certain contempt. Plotinus himself affirms that Plato "everywhere speaks with contempt of the whole world of sense and disapproves of the soul's fellowship with body" (6 [IV 8], 1, 28–30). But this essentially negative conception of the sensible world as the place of evil, or at least something inferior to intelligible realities, will give rise to two different outlooks. The first is a rather negative one which, according to Plotinus, Plato develops in the *Phædrus*; while the other, more positive position, is found in the *Timæus*, where the soul is tasked with saving what can be saved and making the sensible world the best possible replica of the intelligible. From this perspective, as Plotinus concludes, "it is not evil in every way for soul to give body the ability to flourish and to exist, because not every kind of provident care for the inferior deprives the being exercising it of its ability to remain in the highest." (2, 24–26)

It is precisely this double vision, at once pessimistic and optimistic, which forms an integral part of the rich Platonic heritage,[7] that Plotinus is no longer at leisure to maintain in his reaction against the Gnostics' contempt for the world.[8] In Plotinus' interpretation of the Gnostics, their attitude is characterized by a systematic depreciation of the sensible:

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[7] On this double tendency in all Greco-Roman religious thought and its distant Platonic source, see the arguments of A.-J. Festugière, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, *op. cit*. (note 54), vol. II, *Le Dieu cosmique*, pp. x–xiii; pp. 92–94; vol. III, *Les doctrines de l'âme*, pp. 63–96.

[8] The parallel action of the two causes, that of the weakness of the soul and that of the corporeal obscurity, is manifest, for example, in 8 (IV 9), 5, 26–27. Treatise 26 (III 6), though not far removed from treatise 33, which is as well rather reserved in its condemnation of the inferior element: "But perhaps most often what we call the vice of this part [of the soul] is a bad state of the body (σώματος κακεξία) […]." (2, 65) There is no trace here yet of the radical stance that is to be found in Treatise 51.

> The man who censures the nature of the universe does not know what he is doing, and how far this rash criticism of his goes. This is so because the Gnostics do not know that there is an order of firsts, seconds and thirds in regular succession, and so on to the last, and that the things that are worse than the first should not be reviled; one should rather calmly and gently accept the nature of all things, and hurry on oneself to the first, ceasing to concern oneself with the melodrama of the terrors [existing], as they think, in the cosmic spheres […]. (33 [II 9], 13, 1–8)

We find here one of the main leitmotifs of his anti-Gnostic text: "Again, despising the universe and the gods in it and the other noble things is certainly not becoming good" (*ibid.*, 16, 1–2); "For the beauties here exist because of the first beauties. If, then, these here do not exist, neither do those; so these are beautiful in their order after those." (17, 25–26)

Thus, in Plotinus' opinion, it is the optimistic message of the *Timæus*, which praises the role of the descended soul, that the Gnostics neglect in their cosmogony:

> And yet, even if it occurred to them to hate the nature of body because they have heard Plato often reproaching the body for the kind of hindrances it puts in the way of the soul—and he said that all bodily nature was inferior—they should have stripped off this bodily nature in their thought and seen what remained, an intelligible sphere embracing the form imposed upon the universe, souls in their order which without bodies give magnitude and advance to dimension according to the intelligible pattern, so that what has come into being may become equal, to the extent of its power (εἰς δύναμιν), by its magnitude to the partlessness of its archetype:[9] for greatness in the intelligible world is in power, here below in bulk. (33 [II 9], 17, 1–10)

Thus, the message that Plotinus repeatedly expounds against his adversaries is that one cannot condemn the sensible world without also incriminating that from which it arises. For Plotinus, the innocence of the divinities cannot be questioned. Accordingly, the hypothesis of a weakness inherent to the soul—an evil or perversion endogenous to it—must be entirely set aside, which implies ignoring multiple Platonic source texts for the appearance of evil, such as those associated with soul in the *Phædrus* and certain passages from the *Republic* and the *Laws*. Plotinus, then, is not *inconsistent* on the question of the origin of evil. Rather, his thought has evolved. More precisely, in order to mark his distance from

[9] The Greek text here is difficult and has given rise to numerous conjectures. For our part, we accept the text of Kirchhoff, which Bréhier, Theiler and Armstrong follow.

Gnosticism, he has been forced to modify substantially the soul's role in his theodicy.

But there is also a second consequence of this criticism of the Gnostic doctrine, which we will henceforth focus on. If the divine beings can no longer be held responsible for evil, whose origin is *material* (or better yet, *exclusively material*), then neither can they, most especially Soul (which bears the responsibility to create and organize the cosmos as best as it can), be held responsible for the very existence of matter, which is the source of this evil. How could Plotinus, after sharply criticizing the Gnostics for attributing the material obscurity to the inclination of the soul, dare to defend a similar doctrine?[10]

Sensible Matter, By-product of the Emanative Process

Indeed, upon close examination, one finds that sensible matter is, for Plotinus, not a creation of the Soul, but a *by-product* of the alterity-infinity coming from the One, something that has *by itself escaped*, *gone out* or *fallen*, or has been *expelled* from the Infinity above (cf. 12 [II 4], 15; 25 [II 5], 4–5; 26 [III 6], 7, 7–11; 13, 21–27; 34 [VI 6], 1–3; 44 [VI 3], 7; 51 [I 8], 15, 24 ff.),[11] accordingly reducing the responsibility of the higher principles in the process.

As an example of this type of emergence—totally different from the *generation* or *production* of something by a soul, which is diversely described as *place* or some *appropriate outline*, *illumination* or *trace* of herself, but never called matter (ὕλη)—, we can quote the crucial text of 25 (II 5), 5, 13–22, where Plotinus explains:

> It [matter] was not anything actually from the beginning, since it stood apart from all realities, and it did not become anything; it has not been able to take even a touch of colour from the things that wanted to plunge into it, but remaining directed to something else it exists potentially to what comes next; *when the realities of the intelligible world had already come to an end it appeared* [φανεῖσα] and was caught by the things that came into being *after it* [which means of course the sensible copies] and took its place as the last after these too. So, being caught by both [*i.e.*, the sensible copies and the intelligible realities], it could belong actually to neither class

[10] The fact that Plotinus does not speak of ὕλη in the few passages where he describes the final generative or productive activity of soul is significant. On this question, see chapter 1.

[11] This other origin of sensible matter is commented upon at length in Study 1.

> of realities; it is only left for it to be potentially a sort of weak and dim phantasm unable to receive a shape.

Why did matter *appear*? Does this not seem a peculiar, yet very precise verb to use in this context? It *appeared*, quite simply, because in one way or another *it was already there*. If its appearance had been directly subject to the activity of Soul, Plotinus would simply have been repeating the view held by certain Gnostics,[12] and thereby contradicting himself, as he had already refused the theory of a descending soul *producing* matter. When the naturally illuminating intelligible realities reached the naturally dark matter, they necessarily illuminated it, simply because it was there; and it was there because it had already *come*, *fallen*, or otherwise *escaped* from above. The sequence of events connected with this *appearance* merit particular attention. Firstly, there is a halt in the progression of the intelligible realities (T1); then, closely connected with this, there is the appearance of matter itself (T2); finally, there is a grasping of matter by the things that came into being after the appearance of matter (T3). This ordered sequence in three acts is quite peculiar, in so far as it displays a reversal of the axiological order. Matter appears second, but is axiologically third after the copies, *i.e.*, the sensible objects.

Now, it is precisely this *diversified* model of production where the *derivation* of matter leads to this reversal of the emanative order in Plotinus' system that is carefully explained and defended in Treatise 44 (VI 3), 7. This type of emergence can be described as a *differentiated flow* of realities, as opposed to a *regular* or *cascading flow*, wherein A generates B, and then B generates C, every new step of production corresponding at the same time to a decline in being.[13]

Let us begin by noting a passage from 44 (VI 3), 7, 1–9, where Plotinus writes:

> But if anyone should say that the things here which are based on matter have their being from it we shall demand where matter gets being and the existent from. We have explained elsewhere that matter is not primary. But if one says that the other things could not come into existence except on the basis of matter, we shall agree as far as sense-objects are concerned. *But even if matter is prior to these, nothing prevents it from being posterior*

[12] "Where, then, did the darkness come from? If they are going to say that the soul made it when it declined, there was obviously nowhere for it to decline to [logical argument], and the darkness itself was not responsible for the decline [refusal of the down-top model of evil], but the soul's own nature [axiological argument]." (33 [II 9], 12, 41–43)

[13] Cf. e.g., 33 (II 9), 3, 11–12.

> *to many things and to all the things there in the intelligible* [πρὸ τουτῶν δὲ οὖσαν ὕστερον πολλῶν εἶναι καὶ ἐκεῖ πάντων οὐδὲν κωλύει], since the being it has is dim and less than the things based upon it, in so far as they are rational principles and derive more from the existent, but matter is utterly irrational, *a shadow of rational form and a falling away from rational form* [σκιὰ λόγου καὶ ἔκπτωσις λόγου]; […].

Apart from the mention here of the *fall* (ἔκπτωσις) of matter—which goes hand-in-hand with the *escape-concept* just described—the main interest of this passage is that it raises, once again, the issue of this inversion of the order of appearance and the order of being. Matter appears before the copies but is *axiologically* lower than them. This infraction upon the *law* of proportionality between the anterior and the posterior is revisited later: "For when something which is more existent [*i.e.*, the Form] arrives about something which is less existent, the latter [matter] would be first in order, but posterior in substance [τάξει μὲν πρῶτον ἂν εἴη, οὐσίᾳ δὲ ὕστερον]; […]." (7, 16–17) In short, in the order of the *occurrence* of being, we have the set 1→3→2; in the order of the ontological priority of being, we have the standard set 1→2→3.[14]

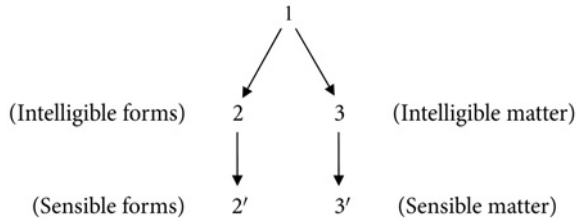
If, however, 3 comes before 2, and is yet inferior to 2, perhaps this is because its mode of appearance differs from that of 2. This is exactly what Plotinus attempts to clarify at the end of this chapter, as he explains how the flow from the unity may occur in different ways, and that it is possible for 3 to be inferior to 2, not because it comes from 2, but because it participates less, and *differently*, in 1.

Here is the schema of those two emanative models and the corresponding text:

[14] There is of course nothing problematic in the fact that Plotinus accuses the Gnostics of ignoring exactly this, the order of the realities: "This is so because the Gnostics do not know that there is an order of firsts, seconds and thirds in regular succession, and so on to the last […]." (33 [II 9], 13, 3–5)

> But one should not perhaps proceed like this. For each [of the three: matter, form and composite] is different as a whole, and the dimness is not something common, just as in the case of life there would be nothing in common between nutritive, perceptive and intelligent life. So here also being is different in matter and in form, *and both together come from one* ***which flows in all sorts of different ways*** [συνάμφω ἀφ' ἑνὸς **ἄλλως καὶ ἄλλως ῥυέντος**]. For it is not only necessary for one to exist more and the other worse and less if the second comes from the first and the third from the second [οὐ γὰρ μόνον δεῖ, εἰ τὸ δεύτερον ἀπὸ τοῦ πρώτου, τὸ δὲ τρίτον ἀπὸ τοῦ δευτέρου, τὸ μὲν μᾶλλον, τὸ δὲ ἐφεξῆς χεῖρον καὶ ἔλαττον], but even if both come from the same, in that one has a larger share in fire, like a pot, and the other less, so as not to become a pot. But perhaps matter and form do not even come from the same: for they are different also in the intelligible realities [τάχα δὲ οὐδ' ἀπὸ τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἡ ὕλη καὶ τὸ εἶδος· διάφορα γὰρ καὶ ἐν ἐκείνοις]. (7, 26–35)

Here, Plotinus suggests the most probable alternative. As is often the case with the use of the word τάχα in the Plotinian corpus, in the last two lines of this passage, Plotinus emphasizes that *perhaps* matter and form do not have the same origin. This new possibility could be schematized as such:



This teaching is quite clear: either matter comes from the same origin, but in a different manner, or it does not even come from the same origin at all, in that it comes *from its corresponding principle in the intelligible world* (*i.e.*, from intelligible matter). In both cases, we are close to a system of derivation of matter which we encounter in post-Plotinian Neoplatonism—in Proclus and others—and close to what we find already anticipated in Moderatus or Eudorus. The crucial point is that, in both of these models (as opposed to the Gnostic model), the intelligible beings are free from direct responsibility for this appearance. Not only do they not *generate* or *produce* matter as such, but they in fact capture it and fasten it down, so as to limit its harmful influence (see above, p. 31 & 33). The intelligible beings, therefore, are responsible for the limitation of matter pernicious influence, not for that influence itself.

One can immediately see the subtlety and efficiency of this doctrine. With it, Plotinus simultaneously attains four goals: 1) he avoids the

pure dualism of positing two originative principles; 2) he avoids the elimination of the active opposition between good and evil, which is fundamental to his understanding of some evil acts and phenomena in the sensible world; 3) he avoids the direct implication of the good in the eruption of evil, the latter being now thought of as a kind of collateral damage or contraband activity occurring in the outskirts of the emanative process; 4) he preserves God's supremacy over evil—not a negligible achievement in the face of a problem widely thought to be unsolvable.

The Proper Goal of Treatise 51

Although the doctrine of Treatise 51 (I 8) is closely connected with that of Treatise 33 (II 9), they differ from one another in a crucial way, namely, each treatise has an entirely different purpose. Treatise 33 has one main goal, which is the refutation of the Gnostics. With respect to evil, its main task is to free the soul (and secondarily the other higher principles) of any causal responsibility for its existence. But Treatise 33 reveals nothing positive about how one should understand evil's eruption into the cosmos, nor does it explain exactly how the different types of evil (physical or moral) occur in the sensible world. Treatise 51 fills precisely this gap. It is in this treatise that Plotinus establishes a theory according to which matter can be considered to be the primary evil and, at the same time, the cause of the weakness of the individual soul, which will thereafter be considered only a secondary evil—a distinction found nowhere before 51. Treatise 33 denies the coherence of the Gnostic theodicy, because if Soul had produced the darkened matter, it, rather than the obscurity already present, would be the cause of its own inclination in this direction. Yet Treatise 33 does not offer the reader Plotinus' own theodicy, and it does not explain how the activity of souls relates to the activity of matter. In fact, by reading only Treatise 33, we would learn very little about the precise activity of matter in the sensible world. It is essentially—if not only—in Treatise 51 that we learn how the previous existence of matter is sufficient to cause the soul's fall, that this fall corresponds to its weakness, and that both would be absent without the active machinations of (the supposedly passive) matter. In this respect, Treatise 51 is probably closer to the very first Plotinian writing, Περὶ τοῦ καλοῦ, or eventually to Treatise 26 (III 6), than to 33, which is silent regarding this delicate mechanism. The same is true regarding the twofold stratification of evil (primary/

secondary), the two types of evil (physical/psychical)—a refinement typical of Treatise 51—and the recognition of a pair of principles opposed to one another, good and evil. This formula has hitherto justly puzzled commentators (ἀρχαι γὰρ ἄμφω, ἡ μὲν κακῶν, ἡ δὲ ἀγαθῶν, 51 [I 8], 6, 33–34), even though the admission of two principles does not imply that they are in any way equal—another refinement of 51 without which the exoneration of soul's accountability regarding evil would remain wholly incomprehensible.

All of this requires, as a precondition, the rejection of the Gnostic cosmogony, which for Plotinus amounts to a "melodrama of terrors" (33 [II 9], 13, 7). None of this however is fully elaborated before Treatise 51. We have already seen that until Treatise 33 Plotinus retained an essentially Platonic conception of evil, while a fundamental shift in his thought occurred in Treatise 33. It is only in Treatise 51 that Plotinus became truly *Plotinian*. I mean by this that only here did he formulate the uniquely Plotinian doctrine of evil, which grounds all evil and perverse phenomena in a single and universal cause: matter. In this sense, it is only in Treatise 51 that Plotinus completes the reorientation of his thought begun negatively in 33. The treatise Περὶ τοῦ τίνα καὶ πόθεν τὰ κακὰ must then be viewed as a necessary complement to 33. Nevertheless, Treatise 33 belongs to the middle period of Plotinus' writing, while Treatise 51 belongs to the last period, when the subjects chosen were no longer suggested to him by the circumstances surrounding his teaching activity (*Vit. Pl.* 5). Why did it take Plotinus so long to work out the detailed version of his position?

The answer to this question can, of course, only be tentative. We do know—as Plotinus himself reveals in 33 (II 9), 10—that some people around him were seduced by the Gnostic's teachings and remained faithful to their newfound philosophy despite Plotinus' repeated attempts to bring them back into his own fold. With this in mind, we may conjecture that the 33rd treatise was in fact not meant to be read by the Gnostics themselves (who were likely perceived as too dogmatic to ever be converted), but rather, it was written as a manual for his own pupils who might have lent the Gnostics a sympathetic ear (10, 1–15). Most probably, Treatise 33 is an understatement by Plotinus, which attempts to minimize the threat his school was in fact facing.[15] By reading Porphyry's report, we learn how ardent his opposition to them trully was:

[15] He mentions it again in 33 (II 9), 15, 1–4: "But there is one point we must be particularly careful not to let escape us, and that is what these [Gnostic] arguments do to

> Plotinus hence often attacked their position in his lectures, and wrote the treatise to which we have given the title "Against the Gnostics"; he left it to us to assess what he passed over. Amelius wrote up to forty volumes against the book of Zostrianus. I, Porphyry, wrote a considerable number of refutations of the book of Zoroaster […]. (16, 9–15)

If we are to rely on Porphyry's account, the quarrel of Plotinus with the Gnostics that endured for many years before the master finally wrote an extensive essay directed against them. Moreover, he asked Amelius and Porphyry to take over the refutation, which they apparently did in a thorough manner. The whole school was thus engaged in this crucial debate. In comparison with Porphyry's dispute with Amelius concerning the status of the Ideas and whether they are inside or outside Intellect (*Vit. Pl.* 18), or the possible effect on Porphyry of the Plotinian criticism of the Aristotelian categories,[16] the anti-Gnostic campaign appears to have been the greatest challenge of Plotinus' intellectual career.

We can easily imagine that, even after Treatise 33 had circulated widely, the Gnostics were still a great threat—probably much more so than Plotinus' discrete indication would lead us to believe—and that many doubts remained over the respective advantages of several doctrinal elements of the debate. Thus the refutation had to continue, and so Plotinus prompted Amelius and Porphyry to further investigate the Gnostic dogmas. We do not know how long they pursued this task, but it could easily have been until Porphyry finally departed for Sicily. Be that as it may, Treatise 33 sorely needed a complement, something that would show the exact role of matter in the production of evil. I suggest, therefore, that Plotinus returned again to the subject because he had to clarify his position and demonstrate the soundness of his approach. He had to show that it was indeed possible to exonerate the principles, and especially Soul, for evil's presence in the sensible world, and this demonstration was needed not only due to the incompleteness of Treatise 33, but to the ongoing dissatisfaction felt by his partisans regarding this crucial problem.

Our conclusion, then, is that as a result of his opposition to the Gnostics, whose teachings were becoming increasingly influential in his own school, Plotinus was forced to minimize the role of Soul and to maximize the role of matter in the emergence of evil in the sensible world.

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the souls of those who hear them and are persuaded by them to despise the universe and the beings in it." Compare 9, 55 ff.

[16] Cf. H.-D. Saffrey: "Pourquoi Porphyre a-t-il édité Plotin? Une étude provisoire", in *Le néoplatonisme après Plotin*, Paris, Vrin, 2000, pp. 4–26.

We might also conjecture that, if its importance is as great as it seems, this same quarrel had other effects on Plotinian doctrine, such as the estimation of the value of the productive arts and of demiurgy in general, or even the appreciation of the situation of the philosopher in our world. We know that the Plotinian system was not complete when its creator began writing, as is clear from the fact that the first treatises do not reveal in all clarity the doctrine of the "Super One" which will only come to the forefront in Treatises 7 and 10.[17] It is not unreasonable, then, to think that opponents, such as the Gnostics, so close to him, could induce a critical shift in Plotinus' thinking; just as the mysterious adversaries of Treatise 39 (VI 8) pressured him to develop, in relation to the One, a *causa sui* argument unheard of anywhere else in his entire corpus. One suspects that there must be other lines of doctrinal evolution influenced by Plotinus' encounter and interaction with the Gnostics. That, however, will be the subject of another investigation.

[17] Cf. P.A. Meijer, *Plotinus on the Good or the One (Enneads VI, 9). An Analytical Commentary*, Amsterdam, Gieben, 1992, p. 27 ff.

STUDY FOUR

A NEW SIGN OF THE IMPACT OF THE QUARREL AGAINST THE GNOSTICS ON PLOTINUS' THOUGHT: TWO MODES OF REASCENT IN 9 (VI 9) AND 37 (VI 8)

I. ΜΟΝΟΥ ΠΡΟΣ ΜΟΝΟΝ, OR THE SOLITARY ASCENT OF THE SOUL IN 9 (VI 9)

Plotinus' famous statement[1] that we must "escape in solitude to the solitary [φυγὴ μόνου πρὸς μόνον]" (9 [VI 9], 11, 51), which concludes his first truly 'mystic' treatise—and his entire corpus according to the systematic order Porphyry forced upon it, who moved it to the very end of the last *Ennead*—sets the tone for the ascent towards the First principle, as Plotinus conceives it and effectively describes it in Treatise 9. In chapter 4, Plotinus attributes the failure to reach a vision of the First to being weighted down by the sensible and to not being thereby able to elevate oneself alone (οὐ μόνος ἀναβεβηκώς, lines 22–23) towards him, when in fact one must attempt to "try to depart from all things and be alone [ἀποστὰς πάντων μόνος εἶναι] […]." (4, 33–34) In what follows, in this same treatise, Plotinus goes so far as to suggest some sort of equivalence between the soul being alone and the soul being in the Principle: "but when it is in itself alone and not in being, it is in that [τὸ δὲ ἐν αὑτῇ μόνῃ καὶ οὐκ ἐν τῷ ὄντι ἐν ἐκείνῳ] […]." (11, 40–41) The 'solitariness' argument corresponds moreover to what we have already encountered in Treatise 1, where, referring to a certain initiation rite, Plotinus notes that it is only shedding all that one has put on in the descent that, "passing in the ascent all that is alien to the God, one sees with one's self alone That alone (αὐτῷ μόνῳ αὐτὸ μόνον ἴδῃ [1 (I 6),

[1] A few scholars have reflected on this phrase, starting with E. Peterson ("Herkunft und Bedeutung der 'Μόνος πρὸς μόνον'-Formel bei Plotin", *Philologus*, 88 (1933), pp. 30–41), to which we can add, among others, E.R. Dodds ("Numenius and Ammonius", in *Les Sources de Plotin*: *dix exposés et discussions*, "Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique" coll., vol. V, E.R. Dodds *et al.* (Eds), Vandœuvres-Geneva, Fondation Hardt, 1960, pp. 16–18) and P.A. Meijer (*Plotinus on the Good or the One* …, *op. cit.* [Study 3, note 17], pp. 157–162).

7, 9; compare 9, 34]), simple, single (10) and pure," or again in Treatise 10, where we are reminded that we must pray the God "alone to him alone [μόνους πρὸς μόνον]." (6, 11)[2] The reduplication of the μόνος, as Peterson has indicated,[3] is a common linguistic turn in Greek and was used normally to designate a private conversation between two people, but we apparently find a first religious use of the phrase in Thessalus of Tralles[4] and, then, in Numenius, a first occurrence where the phrase no longer designates simply the act of speaking (to someone or to God) but the act of seeing or encountering the God. The text of Numenius, which likely influenced Plotinus,[5] insists, as does the Plotinian text, on the abandonment of earthly life implied by the process:

> Thus, far from the visible world, must he commune with the Good, being alone with the alone (solitude), far from man, or living being, or any body, small or great, in an inexpressible, indefinable, immediately divine solitude.[6]

Moreover, Plotinus insists on several occasions in Treatise 9 on the dual relation that then exists between the soul and the divine itself and on the personal character, as it were, of the encounter. Accordingly, he will explain, in chapter 9, that

> 'whoever has seen, knows what I am saying', that the soul then has another life and draws near, and has already come near and has a part in him […]. […] we must put away other things and take our *stand only in this, and become this alone* [καὶ ἐν μόνῳ στῆναι τούτῳ, καὶ τοῦτο γενέσθαι μόνον] […]. (9, 46–51)

Becoming this 'alone' is one way of stating the idea, but Plotinus will press the point even further and go so far as to claim that one can see the soul as

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[2] Further below, we will again consider this parallel formulation, found in 38 (VI 7), 34, 7–8, a treatise written at a much later date.

[3] Peterson, *op. cit*. (note 1), p. 35.

[4] The text's authorship (cf. *Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum*, VIII 3, Boudreaux [Ed.], Bruxelles, In Aedibus Academiae, 1912), wrongly assigned to Harpocration and found at the beginning of his *Opuscula de plantis duodecim signis et septem planetis subiectis*, would in fact be attributable to Thessalus, as Cumont has already once demonstrated (on which, see Peterson, *op. cit*. [note 1], p. 36, Dodds, *op. cit*. [note 1], p. 17, and more particularly A.-J. Festugière's "L'expérience religieuse du médecin Thessalos", *Revue biblique internationale*, 48 (1939), pp. 45–77).

[5] An opinion hold by Dodds and especially Meijer (*Plotinus on the Good or the One …*, *op. cit*. [Study 3, note 17], pp. 160–162), who sees Numenius as the true instigator of the phrase's religio-philosophical career.

[6] *Numenius of Apamea, the Father of Neo-Platonism*, K. Guthrie (transl.), London, Bell, 1917, I § 10, p. 4. Reprinted in *The Neoplatonic Writings of Numenius*, M. Wagner (Foreword), Lawrence KS, Selene Books, 1987, p. 4.

"having become—but rather, being—a god [θεὸν γενόμενον, μᾶλλον δὲ ὄντα] […]." (9, 58) The last two chapters will stress again the essentially dual character of the yoking which then brings together the soul and the first principle, as is apparent in the following excerpt:

> But perhaps one should not say "will see", but "was seen", if one must speak of these as two [δύο], the seer and the seen, and not both as one [ἓν ἄμφω]—a bold statement. So then the seer does not see and does not distinguish and does not imagine two [δύο] […]. For here too when the centres have come together they are one, but there is duality [δύο] when they are separate. (10, 11–18)

The overcoming of duality is evoked again in the following chapter ("Since, then, there were not two [δύο], but the seer himself was one with the seen [11, 4–5]"), but with an additional element. This is the idea that the soul, reaching the embrace of the First "had already run up beyond beauty" (11, 16), that is to say, it has surpassed the level of the Intellect and is no longer a part of beautiful things (intelligible ideas) immediately compared to the temple's statues which stand *before* the sanctuary—itself *barren*—these being only objects of a second order vision (11, 16ff.), which is, for Plotinus, necessary to surpass (1 [I 6], 9, 34ff.), and to which he will return several times in the course of his second 'canonical' mystic treatise (38 [VI 7] 16, 1; 22, 20–24; 31, 1–3). Such is, in the end, the meaning of the statement quoted above to the effect that, when the soul, "is in itself alone and not in being [that is, at the level of the second nature, which is both Intellect and Being], it is in that (τὸ δὲ ἐν αὑτῇ μόνῃ καὶ οὐκ ἐν τῷ ὄντι ἐν ἐκείνῳ)." (11, 40–41)

This reascent of the soul (1 [I 6], 7, 8; 9, 34; 5 [V 9], 3, 25; 9 [VI 9], 3, 21; 4, 7. 21. 23; 11, 11. 35; 31 [V 8], 10, 2–3; 32 [V 5], 10, 7–8; 39 [VI 8], 15, 21. 31;) towards the One, and the encounter that ensues and which may lead to the collapse of identity mentioned above, does not prevent Plotinus from recognising, in Treatise 9, the natural primacy of the Intellect over the Soul (5, 23ff.), and the priority of the divine Souls over ours. Plotinus will indeed be explicit and write about the Intellect, when speaking of the multiplicity inherent in it, that it "must be of higher authority than the soul" (5, 22–23), and, reflecting on the natural circular movement of the soul around a centre that is not outside but inside of itself, being indeed its origin, he will write that "it will move around this from which it is and will depend on this, bringing itself into accord with that which all souls ought to, and the souls of the gods always do […]." (8, 5–8) However, the ascent and the encounter with the First principle would apparently only pertain to our own souls, and not to the Intellect or to the divine souls. Is

such an interpretation defendable? A comparison with a latter account, found in 38 (VI 7), 34–36 might allow us to determine this.

II. The Accompanied Ascent of the Soul in 38 (VI 7), 36

A careful reading of Treatise 38 reveals a subtle—yet significant—shift in Plotinus' description of the reascent of the soul. This is that the soul no longer rises alone to the Principle. It is now borne up by an no less than the Intellect itself. Moreover, the soul's unique relationship with the One now gives way to a more complex interaction in which there will no longer be two, but three terms entering into play: the One, the (prenoetic) Intellect and the soul as such.

Admittedly, Plotinus still retains the idea previously put forth of the necessity of a stripping of the individual soul in its reascent. He notes that "the soul also, when it gets an intense love of it, puts away all the shape which it has, even whatever shape of the intelligible there may be in it" (34, 2–4), and goes so far as tom reintroduce the crucial phrase according to which the soul proceeds in this way in order "that [it] alone may receive it alone [ἵνα δέξηται μόνη μόνον]." (34, 7–8) So far, this treatise offers us nothing that Treatise 9 does not, and one might even say that chapter 34 of Treatise 38 echoes the teaching of Treatise 9, since Plotinus is still describing here the narrow intimacy of the union of the soul and the One in terms comparable to those used earlier ("for there is nothing between, nor are there still two but both are one; nor could you still make a distinction while it is present [34, 13–14]"). The only potentially novel aspect of this second description is perhaps the unusual insistence with which Plotinus shows the soul as being still capable, even at the moment of the union, where it is now supposedly "one" with God, of judging (κρίνειν) what is happening to it, of knowing (γιγνώσκειν) Him whom it is now encountering, and of relishing (εὐπαθεῖ) this experience (34, 25–30).[7] However, chapters 35 and 36 introduce new elements which, quite surprisingly, have not caught the attention of translators and commentators.

We can begin with the most striking point, the triangle formed of the Good, the Intellect and the soul. We now quote lines from 35, 33–40:

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[7] On this paradox, cf. for example Meijer, *op. cit.* (Study 3, note 17), p. 318, who reminds us that in 9 (VI 9), 11, 8 ff., Plotinus had banned all reasoning and all intellection from the soul.

> But the soul sees [the Good] by a kind of confusing and annulling the intellect which abides within it—but rather its intellect sees [the Good] first and the vision comes also to it and *the two* [τὰ δύο] become one. But the Good is spread out over *them* [ἐπ' αὐτοῖς] and fitted in to *the union of both* [συναρμοσθὲν τῇ ἀμφοτέρων συστάσει]; playing upon them and *uniting the two* [ἑνῶσαν τὰ δύο] it rests upon *them* [αὐτοῖς] and gives them a blessed perception and vision, lifting them so high that they are not in place nor in anything other, among things where it is natural for one thing to be in another […].

Throughout this excerpt, and even when he refers to the unification of the two terms which the Intellect and the soul represent, Plotinus upholds the triune character of the relationship established in this circumstance. The Good is "spread over both," "playing upon them both," etc. Perhaps the most difficult passage to interpret is that one where Plotinus states that the Good *harmonizes* itself or is *fitted in to the union of both* (τῇ ἀμφοτέρων συστάσει), that is, to both *simultaneously*, or to both *together*, which neither Hadot's ("harmonisé à leur union") nor Fronterotta's ("accordé à eux") translation accurately render, since it is a matter, not of the One being in harmony with them both, but with the already actualized *union* of these two, which is quite different.[8] We might say that, except for the moment of their fusion, where neither one nor the other is individually distinguishable, the Intellect and the soul continuously accompany each other in the common experience to which the Good introduces them. Where the text in Treatise 9 (VI 9) refers to both, as it has been noted, it was always about the Good and the soul, and not about the Intellect and the soul standing before a third. What is the reason for this reformulation? We find no answers to this question anywhere in the commentary tradition. In fact, the question itself seems to have been largely ignored.

In his commentary on said Treatise however, P. Hadot raises a doubt when he remarks that: "the soul is not alone with the Sole One: it must initially become, thanks to its Spirit, the loving Spirit which, itself, is alone with the Sole One."[9] It is quite true that the soul must in fact become Intellect in order to unite itself with the Good, but does it follow from this that the (loving) Intellect is now alone with the Sole One as well? That is not exactly what Plotinus is attempting to convey. It is rather that the vision of the Sole One comes first to the Intellect of the soul, then to the soul itself, and that then they *both* become one, the Good extending itself

[8] Armstrong here is more accurate, or again Theiler: "fügt sich in ihre [die beiden] Vereinigung".

[9] *Plotin. Traité 38*, Paris, Cerf, 1988, p. 345. Translated.

not over the loving Intellect—standing alone with the Sole One—but over *them both* (which have at the same time become one) and harmonising itself to *the union of both* (a union which has made them one). One point, in any case, is quite clear: the soul never finds itself alone with the Good. This is a thesis which did not appear clearly, or even at all, in Treatise 9 (VI 9).

Another problem pertains to the *ascent* of the Intellect itself. Is this not a new idea as well? We have just seen that soul is never alone in its encounter with the Good but attains it in conjunction with (loving) Intellect, with which it joins in its reascent. In chapter 36, Plotinus introduces an image that is both different from this one and more complimentary to it, describing the ascension of the mystic towards the First Principle as a sort of rising of the waters. He, Plotinus tells us here, who has himself become "substance and Intellect and 'the complete living being'" (10–11) is "carried out of it by the surge of the wave of Intellect itself and lifted on high by a kind of swell and sees suddenly, not seeing how [...]." (17–19). Like a cork buoyed by the waters, the soul of the mystic is carried by the wave of Intellect's own rising, in a description which otherwise leaves as rather enigmatic the role of this 'he' who sees within the Intellect.

Yet, reading over Treatise 9 (VI 9), we find no mention anywhere of any kind of *ascent* of Intellect in the unitive experience, even if the mediation of Intellect is given as a prerequisite for the vision. The crucial passage, in this context, is that of lines 22–28 of chapter 3, where Plotinus writes:

> Therefore one must become Intellect and entrust one's soul to and set it firmly under Intellect, that it may be awake *to receive what that sees* [ἵν' ἃ ὁρᾷ ἐκεῖνος ἐγρηγορυῖα δέχοιτο], and may by this Intellect behold the One, without adding any sense-perception or receiving anything from sense-perception into that Intellect, but beholding the most pure with the pure Intellect, and the primary part of Intellect.

Though the Intellect is the unavoidable mediator of the soul's ascension,[10] it does not itself rise with the soul in this latter's pilgrimage towards the Father. Why then, we must ask, is it described as doing so in Treatise 38?

[10] On the Intellect as a necessary intermediary, see also 9 (VI 9), 11, 16–22; 10 (V 1), 6, 9–15; 51 (I 8), 2, 23–25.

III. The Plotinian Critique of the Soul's Ascent According to the Gnostics

A possible explanation for the reconfiguration of the ascent of the soul to which we are assisting in Treatise 38 is to be found in Plotinus' critique of the Gnostics in Treatise 33. Consider what the reader learns there. As evidence of this, we would first offer this rather long excerpt from chapter 9:

> But one ought to try to become as good as possible oneself, but not to think that only oneself can become perfectly good—for if one thinks this one is not yet perfectly good. One must rather think that there are other perfectly good men, and good spirits as well, and, still more, the gods who are in this world and look to the other, and, most of all, the ruler of this universe, the most blessed Soul. Then at this point one should go on to praise the intelligible gods, and then, above all, the great king of that other world, most especially by displaying his greatness in the multitude of the gods. It is not contracting the divine into one but showing it in that multiplicity in which God himself has sown it, which is proper to those who know the power of God, inasmuch as, abiding who he is, he makes many gods, all depending upon himself and existing through him and from him. And this universe exists through him and looks to him, the whole of it and each and every one of the gods in it, and it reveals what is his to men, and it and the gods in it declare in their oracles what is pleasing to the intelligible gods. But if they are not what that supreme God is, this in itself is according to the nature of things. But if you want to despise them, and exalt yourself, alleging that you are no worse then they are, then, first of all, in proportion to a man's excellence he is graciously disposed to all, to men too. The man of real dignity must ascend in due measure, with an absence of boorish arrogance, *going only so far as our nature is able to go*, and consider that there is room for the others at God's side, and not set himself alone next after God; this is like flying in our dreams and will deprive him of becoming a god, *even as far as the human soul can. It can as far as intellect leads it; but to set oneself above intellect is immediately to fall outside it*. (26–52)

In the crucial passage here, Plotinus writes that the ascent towards the supreme principle is only possible for a man *as long as he is guided by Intellect* (δύναται δὲ εἰς ὅσον νοῦς ἄγει, line 51)—which is precisely the novelty which Plotinus introduces in Treatise 38. Therefore, the desire to rise or "to set oneself above Intellect is immediately to fall outside it (τὸ δ' ὑπὲρ νοῦν ἤδη ἐστὶν ἔξω ⟨τοῦ⟩ νοῦ πεσεῖν, line 51–52)". The possibility is thus eliminated from the start by the reconfigured teaching of Treatise 38, where the mystic is constantly accompanied by the Intellect, since he is carried "by the surge of the wave of Intellect" ([VI 7], 36, 17–18) and cannot therefore achieve anything without it.

But several other points in chapter 9 also demand our attention. Consider first the warnings issued against human presumptuousness, where Plotinus explains that the ascent is simply a matter of trying "to become as good as possible oneself" (ὡς ἄριστον μὲν αὐτὸν πειρᾶσθαι γίνεσθαι, line 27), and that "the man of real dignity must ascend in due measure, with an absence of boorish arrogance, *going only so far as our nature is able to go*" (εἰς μέτρον μετὰ οὐκ ἀγροικίας, ἐπὶ τοσοῦτον ἰόντα ἐφ' ὅσον ἡ φύσις δύναται ἡμῶν, line 46–47), which means as much, explains Plotinus, "as the human soul can" (ὅσον ἐστὶ δυνατὸν ψυχῇ ἀνθρώπου, line 50), a capacity which depends in turn on the conduct of the Intellect (line 51). He revisits this point only a few lines further, noting that one "does not attribute the ability to himself alone [οὐχ αὑτῷ μόνῳ διδοὺς τὸ δύνασθαι]." (9, 79)

This growing number of reservations, which had gone mostly unnoticed until now, contrasts with the adventurousness of Plotinus' earlier work, the first 'mystic' treatise insisting rather on the capacity of the soul—of the soul, granted, of certain men only and not of all[11]—to achieve the coveted union, going as far as claiming that at the moment of ultimate union, one can see oneself as "having become—but rather, being—a god [θεὸν γενόμενον, μᾶλλον δὲ ὄντα]". This is a Gnostic statement,[12] and one which will not reappear in the Plotinian corpus. In sum, we have little choice but to conclude that Treatise 38 is much less emphatic about the intimacy of the union, or even about the identity of

[11] 9 (VI 9), 7, 4–5; 33–34; 8, 8–10; 9, 44–46; 55–60; 11, 28–30; 49–51.

[12] 9 (VI 9), 9, 58. This formulation is already present in Hermetism: "And then, stripped of the effects of the cosmic framework, the human enters the region of the ogdoad; he has his own proper power, and along with the blessed he hymns the father. Those present there rejoice together in his presence, and, having become like his companions, he also hears certain powers that exist beyond the ogdoadic region and hymn god with sweet voice. They rise up to the father in order and surrender themselves to the powers, and, having become powers, *they enter into god. This is the final good for those who have received knowledge: to be made god* (θεωθῆναι)." (*Hermetica, op. cit.* (note 40), I, § 26, p. 6) But, more significantly, we come across this doctrine in *Allogenes* (*NH* XI 3, *op. cit.* [Study 2, note 47], 52, 12; 56, 31–35) and in *Zostrianos* (VIII. 44, 5–22 [Study 2, note 6]), a Gnostic text which we know, through Porphyry (*Vit. Pl.* 16, 6), to have circulated in Plotinus' school, and also in *The Untitled Text* (Study 2, note 42). Moreover, the theme of *becoming God* extends its roots further into Greek culture, as it is found notably in Orphism, written on the golden slats of certain initiates' tombs, one of them, for instance, bearing this inscription: "You will be a god and not a mortal" (translated from II B 1 THURII, line 9, in G.P. Carratelli, *Les lamelles d'or orphiques. Instructions pour le voyage d'outre-tombe des initiés grecs*, A.Ph. Segonds—C. Luna (transl.), Paris, Belles Lettres, 2003, p. 106).

the mystic with the First principle,[13] as we find him to be in the short Treatise 9, in which such descriptions abound.[14]

Has Plotinus, when reproaching the hypothetical Gnostic of 33 for wanting to "set himself alone next after God", which would be something "like flying in our dreams" (9, 48–49), forgotten the honeyed words with which, in Treatise 6 (IV 8), he evoked his own solitary ascent toward the divine? This justly famous passage deserved to be cited:

> Often I have woken up out of the body to my self and have entered into myself, going out from all other things; I have seen a beauty wonderfully great and felt assurance that then most of all I belonged to the better part; I have actually lived the best life *and come to identity with the divine* [τῷ θείῳ εἰς ταὐτὸν γεγενημένος]; and set firm in it I have come to that supreme actuality, setting myself above all else in the realm of Intellect.
>
> (6 [IV 8], 1, 1–7)

Here again, his description of his pilgrimage accords little attention to the necessary mediation of the Intellect, which becomes so central in 38.

Whatever the case may be, the solitary flight of the soul decried in chapter 9 of Treatise 33 is also problematic in the fact that it singles out the Gnostic firstly from other men, secondly from other beings which also aspire to ascend, that is, demons, astral bodies and even the Soul of the world itself (18, 36) and, thirdly from the Intellect. We will now briefly the Gnostic soul's supposed priority over each of these.

III.1. *The Gnostic's Privileged Status in the Face of Other Men*

Chapter 9 of 33 constantly reminds the reader of how the Gnostics consider themselves to be uniquely privileged among men. We must not, however, assume like them "that only oneself can become perfectly good […]. One must rather think that there are other perfectly good men […]" (9, 27–29); we must "consider that there is room for the others at God's side […]." (9, 47–48). Plotinus considers that such presumptuousness is a sure sign of folly. "But stupid men believe this sort of talk as soon as they hear 'you shall be better than all, not only men, but gods' […]." (9, 52–55). This special status is, moreover, reinforced by the fact that the Gnostics see themselves alone as 'children of God'. How, indeed, Plotinus asks, could we expect modesty from a child who is taught that "you are the son of God, and the others whom you used to admire are not […]."

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[13] The only significant reference is found in 38 (VI 7), 34, 13–14, the impact of which was considerably reduced by chapters 35 and 36 which follow.

[14] Cf. 9 (VI 9), 8, 27–29; 9, 55–60; 10, 11–18; 11, 4–7.

(9, 56–57). One can surmise that, with these words, Plotinus is evoking cases of his own pupils being courted by the sect, whilst the other men, only mistakenly admired (not being children of God), are none other than the Platonists and, naturally, himself.

This controversial doctrine, as we know, is amply documented[15]. The Valentinian Gnostics generally distinguished three types of men (*pneumatic*, *psychic* and *hylic*), and granted the pneumatics a special nature in virtue of which they belong, in principle, to the Pleroma, whence he originated and to which he will return, whatever his behaviour has been.[16] His salvation is assured, in spite of his actions in the sensible world, to which he does not belong, while the evaluation of the psychic soul is pending and the hylic, for his part, is condemned to destruction. This is particularly clear in a passage taken from the *Allogenes*, where what follows is revealed to the character bearing the same name: "No one is able to hear [these things] except the great powers alone, O Allogenes. A great power was put upon you, which the Father of the All, the Eternal, put upon you before you came to this place, in order that those things that are difficult to distinguish you might distinguish and those things that are unknown to the multitude you might know, and that you might escape (in safety) to the One who is yours, who was first to save and who does not need to be saved."[17]

It is in this sense that the pneumatic is held to be a child of God,[18] as we see for example in the *Gospel of Philip*:

> When the pearl is cast down into the mud it becomes [not] greatly despised, nor if it is anointed with balsam oil will it become more precious. But it always has value in the eyes of is owner. Compare the sons of God, wherever they may be. They still have value in the eyes of their father."[19]

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[15] For the three races, see Irenæus, *St. Irenæus of Lyons. Against the Heresies*, I, (D.J. Unger–J.J. Dillon [transl.], New York, Paulist Press, 1992), notably I 5, 5–7, 5; *The Excerpta ex Theodoto*, *op. cit.* (Study 2, note 11), § 50–57, pp. 73–79. For the repercussions of this theme in the Nag Hammadi corpus, consult the entries under 'pneumatique' and 'race' in the thematical index in *Écrits gnostiques*, *op. cit.* (Study 2, note 44).

[16] Cf. *St. Irenæus of Lyons*, *op. cit.* (Study 2, note 15), I 7, 1.

[17] Cf. *Allogenes*, *op. cit.* (Study 2, note 47), *NH* XI 3, 50, 21–36, p. 493.

[18] See *CH* XIII 14, *op. cit.* (Study 2, note 40), p. 52: "Do you not know that you have been born a god and a child of the one, as I, too, have?" On this matter: A. Orbe, *Cristologia gnostica, Introducción a la soteriología de los siglos II y III*, Madrid, La Editorial Católica, 1976, pp. 308–317.

[19] *NH* II 3, 62, 19–26, W.W. Isenberg (transl.), in *The Nag Hammadi Library, op. cit.* (Study 2, note 6), p. 147. A similar comparison is found in Irenæus, *St. Irenæus of Lyons*, *op. cit.* (note 15), I 6, 2.

The 'perfect', stemming from the 'seed of the Holy Spirit,'[20] therefore stand apart from other men, as Irenæus comments:

> The consummation will take place when every spiritual element has been formed and perfected by knowledge. The spiritual element is the spiritual persons who possess the perfect knowledge about God, and have been initiated into the mysteries of Achamoth; and they assume that they themselves are these.[21]

For Plotinus, such a privilege is inadmissible as, initially, "every soul is a child of That Father." (33 [II 9], 16, 9)

The situation grows in complexity, however, since Plotinus does not forbid the Gnostic classification, but rather substitutes it with his own hierarchy, inherited from Plato,[22] a hierarchy which also distinguishes three types of men. This Platonic hierarchy restricts to the wise men (σπουδαίοις 9, 7 & 9) the possibility of directing themselves higher upwards and towards the most elevated (9, 9), those very men which he will later refer to as the better men (ἀρίστοις line 29), whom God loves (line 72), or again as the blessed (μακάρια line 78). Thus, Plotinus relates in the closing lines of chapter 9, that contrary to the Gnostic conception, the man of true worth, who supports the tribulations of this world,

> values individuals according to their worth, but presses on always to that goal to which all press on that can—he knows that there are many that press on to the higher world, and those that attain are blessed, others, according to what is possible for them, have the destiny which fits them—*and he does not attribute the ability to himself alone*. (9, 75–79)

Does Plotinus, who protests so vehemently against Gnostic elitism—which is itself apparently subject to interpretation[23]—, indeed offer a real alternative? Interpreters have yet to offer an answer to this question. One can assume, by insisting on the necessity of personal effort in the reascent (9, 59) and a simple and ordered life which is judged right (10, 14, 12–13;

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[20] *NH* II 3, 85, 23, *op. cit*. (note 19), p. 159.

[21] *St. Irenæus of Lyons*, *op. cit*. (note 15), I 6, 1.

[22] Cf. *Phædo* 82 a; *Republic* X 613; *Thaætetus* 176a–b; *Timæus* 90a–c; *Laws* 716 b.

[23] In the Gnosis, 'salvation' is not always preordained 'by nature', but can require a personal decision, as suggests J.D. Turner (*Zostrien* [*NH* VIII 1], C. Barry *et al*. [transl.], PUL/Peeters, 2000, p. 484), echoing *Zostrianos* 44, 5–22, and *The Apocryphon of John* (*NH* II 1; IV 1), 25, 16–27, 30. See also, with respect to this, J.-P. Mahé's "Notice" to *L'exposé du mythe de Valentin*, in *Écrits Gnostiques*, *op. cit*. (Study 2, note 44), who writes that "*nul n'est exclu de la gnose*" (p. 1507).

38–44; 15, 10, ff.), all the while being surprised by the absence of any treatise on virtue in Gnostic writings (15, 28), that Plotinus finds in the Platonic theory of metempsychosis and the retributive order that is attached to it (9, 23–26; 77–79; 13, 25–26), to be sufficient.

III.2. *The Gnostic's Privileged Status in the Face of Other Divine Beings*

The Gnostic, standing apart from other men, also stands apart from the divine beings: demons, celestial bodies, World Soul (9, 30–33). However, the whole universe "and the gods in it declare in their oracles what is pleasing to the intelligible gods" (9, 40–41), and one cannot therefore believe themselves to be "better than the heavens" (9, 58–59). The Gnostic contempt for the heavens as well as for the divine beings which it harbours (all of which stems from the Intelligible), is contradictory for Plotinus, as he holds that one cannot love the Father without loving his offspring (16, 1 ff.). For Plotinus "every soul is a child of That Father" (16, 1 ff.), and to which he adds that "there are souls in these [the heavenly bodies] too, and intelligent and good ones, *much more closely in touch with the beings of the higher world than our souls are*." (16, 9–11). In short, the Gnostics attempt to break from the natural order of things and dissociate themselves from the divine beings, which in fact precede and surpass them. Hence, Plotinus' amazement at the thought that the Gnostics might "call the lowest of men brothers, but refuse, in their 'raving talk' to call the sun and the gods in the sky brothers and the soul of the universe sister" (18, 17–19), when, in fact, the act of contemplation in us *imitates* the continuous act of the stars and of the World Soul. Plotinus therefore concludes that "[e]ven if the Gnostics say that they alone can contemplate, *that does not make them any more contemplative* […]." (18, 35–36).

For the Gnostics, the reascent of the soul requires a passing through each celestial sphere, each in their respective turn, until the intelligible has been reached. This is the case, for example, in the *Zostrianos*—a text studied in Plotinus' circle—which has been summarized thusly by J.D. Turner:

> The treatise is built around a series of progressive visions and revelations of transcendent beings which the seer Zostrianos encounters in the course of his supra-celestial ascension. Upon attaining each level, he is informed as to its nature and its inhabitants, which he contemplates and to which he assimilates himself. Each step of this ascent is marked by the reception

> of a transcendental baptism and of a seal reflecting the Sethian baptismal ritual of the 'five seals'.[24]

This teaching, common to both the Gnostics and the *Chaldean Oracles*,[25] is based on the idea that the astrological determinism constitutes an obstacle to the liberation of the soul, and therefore an exact understanding of the cosmic mechanism is absolutely crucial. As Tardieu notes:

> at each step, chosen and theurgist must present to the guardians of the planetary orders the password which lets the traveller pursue his return through eschatological spaces […]. Whether they be *voces mysticae* or *koina*, the passwords have the same function and bear the same names: ἀπόῤῥητα and σύμβολα, from the Gnostics of Celsius (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 6 31), σύμβολον (50, 13, Kr. = 191 n. 55 L.), σύνθημα (50, 18 Kr. = 296 Th. = 190 n. 50 L.), γνώρισμα (59, 11 Kr. = 293 Th. = 213 n. 114 L.) from the Chaldeans. The Gnostic *aporrèta* are revelations made to the soul to allow it to pay toll (τέλος) by answering questions asked by the τελῶναι ('toll collectors'; περιλῆπται, 'duty collectors', in the Askewianus), thereby obtaining his ἀπολύτρωσις.[26] (= *sôte*, *NHC* V 33, 1–9)

The following excerpt from Pseudo-Hippolytus, who is writing about the Peratæ, reflects the same line of thought:

> They denominate themselves, however, Peratæ, imagining that none of those things existing by generation can escape the determined lot for those things that derive their existence from generation. For if, says (the Peratic), anything be altogether begotten, it also perishes, as also is the opinion of the Sibyl. But we alone, he says, who are conversant with the necessity of generation, and the paths through which man has entered into the world, and who have been accurately instructed (in these matters), we alone are competent to proceed through and pass beyond [περᾶσαι] destruction.[27]

Pseudo-Hippolytus describes also how the Peratæ hold that the stars have an evil influence: "the stars are the gods of destruction, which impose upon existent things the necessity of alterable generation."[28]

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[24] *Écrits gnostiques*, *op. cit.* (Study 2, note 44), "Notice", p. 1249. Translated.

[25] On this point, see M. Tardieu's masterly "La gnose valentinienne et les *Oracles chaldaïques*", in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, vol. 1, *The School of Valentinus*, B. Layton (Ed.), Leiden, Brill, 1980, pp. 194–231.

[26] *Ibid*., p. 221. Translated.

[27] *Refutation of all Heresies*, *op. cit.* (Study 2, note 13), V 11. Compare V 5, referring to Jesus: "On this account, O Father, send me; Bearing seals, I shall descend; Through ages whole I'll sweep, All mysteries I'll unravel, And forms of Gods I'll show; And secrets of the saintly path, Styled 'Gnosis,' I'll impart."

[28] *Ibid*, V 11. A similar reference to bad stars is found in *The Excerpta ex Theodoto* (*op. cit.* [Study 2, note 11], 71), hence the necessity of baptism to free oneself of their influences: "Until baptism, they say, Fate is real, but after it the astrologists are no longer

For Plotinus, this Gnostic-Chaldean presupposition is simply indefensible, since it overturns the natural order of dependence of the inferior with respect to the superior:

> The causes are not present there which make people bad here below, and there is not badness of body, disturbed and disturbing. And why should they not have understanding, in their everlasting peace, and grasp in their intellect God and the intelligible gods? Shall our wisdom be greater than that of the gods there in the sky? Who, if he has not gone out of his mind, could tolerate the idea? (8, 34–39)

Certain Hermetic and Gnostic texts—of which it is not possible to determine whether Plotinus had knowledge—emphatically claim this superiority over the celestial bodies. This is the case in the *Corpus hermeticum*, where one can read:

> For the human is a godlike living thing, not comparable to the other living things of the earth but to those in heaven above, who are called gods. Or better—if one dare tell the truth—the one who is really human is above these gods as well, or at least they are wholly equal in power to one another.[29]

Man being superior in certain respects to all other things, maintains a privileged relationship with God: "every living thing is immortal, but most of all mankind, who is capable of receiving god and *fit to keep company with him* [τῷ θεῷ συνουσιαστικός]. With this living thing alone does god converse, at night through dreams and through omens by day […]."[30] The same kind of argument is found in the *Asclepius* 7, where we read of "that conjunction with the gods which only humans enjoy fully because the gods esteem them—those humans who have gained so much happiness that they grasp the divine consciousness of understanding,"[31] and again in *CH* IV 2—without a doubt, the most illustrative text on the subject:

> And if the cosmos prevailed over living things as something ever-living, ⟨the man⟩ prevailed even over the cosmos through reason and mind. The

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right." (*Ibid*., 78; compare *CH* XII 7, *op. cit*. [note 40], p. 44) The difference between this approach and the Plotinian doctrine is great indeed, when we think that, for Plotinus, it is through the practice of contemplation that one is freed from magic influence (28 [IV 4], 44).

[29] *CH* X 24, *op. cit*. (Study 2, note 40), p. 36. Compare X 25: "For none of the heavenly gods will go down to earth, leaving behind the bounds of heaven, yet the human rises up to heaven and takes its measure […]." (p. 36)

[30] *CH* XII 19, *Ibid*., p. 47; my emphasis.

[31] *Asclepius*, I 7, in *CH*, *op. cit*. (Study 2, note 40), p. 70.

> man became a spectator of god's work. He looked at it in astonishment and recognized its maker.[32]

In the *Asclepius* of the Nag Hammadi collection, we read that God has made men both mortal and immortal, in order that they be "better than the gods, since indeed [the] gods are immortal, but men alone are both immortal and mortal",[33] whence comes this kinship of men with the gods as, the text explains further, of those men, at the very least, "who have attained learning and knowledge".[34]

III.3. *The Privileged Status of the Gnostic with Regard to the Intellect*

Even more contentious, however, is the Plotinian statement according to which the Gnostic, in his ascent to the supreme Principle, and in his desire to "set himself alone next after God [αὐτὸν μόνον μετ᾽ ἐκεῖνον τάξαντα]" (9, 48–49), believes himself able to abandon the Intellect, and therefore must hold himself to be superior to it (9, 51–52). This idea, it must be mentioned, had already been touched on in Treatise 32, in the well-known account of the respective attributes of the Good (the One) and the Beautiful (the Intellect), where Plotinus writes:

> Then they dispute the first place with beauty and wrangle contentiously with it, considering that it has come into being like themselves. It is as if someone who holds the lowest rank at court were to want to attain equal honour with the man who stands next to the king, on the ground that they both derive from one and the same source; he does not realise that though he too depends on the king the other ranks before him.
>
> (32 [V 5], 12, 24–30)

The fact that Plotinus returns, in Treatise 33, to this very *rivalry*[35] is unsurprising: the Lycopolian has obviously found a teaching in the Gnostics bearing precisely on this point, even if the literature which has reached us does not really confirm with less certainty this '*surpassing of the Intellect*'—third privilege of the chosen—than it did the two previous privileges. What then could be the source of this teaching?

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[32] *CH* IV 2, *op. cit.* (Study 2, note 40), p. 15.

[33] *Asclepius*, *NH* VI 8, 67, 29–68, 9, J. Brashler–P.A. Dirkse–D.M. Parrott (transl.), in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, *op. cit.* (Study 2, note 6), p. 333.

[34] *Ibid.*, 68, 14–15, p. 333.

[35] Compare the formulation found at 33 (II 9), 9, 48–49 (αὐτὸν μόνον μετ᾽ ἐκεῖνον) to that from 32 (V 5), 12, 27 (τῷ μετὰ βασιλέα).

It is not impossible that Plotinus might be referring here to a text of the same type as in the *Allogenes*—if not to this text itself—. This text speaks of the young initiate Allogenes who, after experiencing several revelations brought about through a succession of 'withdrawals', begining with the withdrawal from the Beatitude to the Vitality, and from this last to Existence (the three intermediary Luminary Powers of the Triple-Powered One located between the unknowable One and Barbelo's Æon), which culminate in this solitary ascent to the Unknowable itself:

> […] by a revelation of the Indivisible One and the One who is at rest. I was filled with revelation by means of a primary revelation of the Unknowable One. [As though] I were ignorant of him, I [knew] him and I received power [by] him. Having been permanently strengthened I knew the One who exists in me and the Triple-Powered One and the revelation of his uncontainableness. [And] by means of a primary revelation of the First One (who is) unknowable to them all, the God who is beyond perfection, I saw him and the Triple-Powered One that exists in them all. I was seeking the ineffable and Unknowable God—whom if one should know him, he would be absolutely ignorant of him—the Mediator of the Triple-Powered One who subsists in stillness and silence and is unknowable.[36]

Allogenes' experience does then seem to occur 1) above Barbelo's Æon itself (that is, for Plotinus, over the Intellect) and, 2) in solitude, even though the voyage is later glossed over by the Luminary Powers (61, 25 ff.). In any case, we find here both of the central tenets attributed to the Gnostics by Plotinus.

One is struck, moreover, by the description of the First principle (the Unknowable-One/invisible Spirit)[37] in the *Allogenes*, a description containing a certain number of traits which have their counterpart in only one Plotinian text, Treatise 39 (VI 8, *The Descent of the Soul into Bodies*), confirming the Gnostic backdrop of the entire discussion pursued there. The description to which we are referring is that of the First principle as "a nonsubstantial substance" (47, 34; 48, 26–27), which as we learn further on would have *emanated from* itself, thereby foreshadowing the auto-causality of the Plotinian One. We shall cite *Allogenes*, *op. cit.* (note 47), 64, 37 ff.:

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[36] *Allogenes* (Study 2, note 47), p. 497.

[37] *Écrits gnostiques*, *op. cit.* (Study 2, note 44), "Notice", p. 1540 (translated): "The Unknowable is the supreme divine principle, pre-existing, beyond being and comprehension, now distinct from visible Spirit, now assimilated to it."

> This one thus exists from […] something […] set firmly on the … a] beauty and a [first emergence] of stillness and silence and tranquility and unfathomable greatness. When *he appeared*, he did not need time nor ⟨did he partake⟩ of eternity, but he came out of himself; he is unfathomably unfathomable. He does not activate himself so as to become still. He is not an existence lest he be in want. Spatially he is corporeal, while properly he is incorporeal. *He has non-being existence*.

Only Treatise 39 (VI 8), where Plotinus' *causa sui* argument appears for the first and only time, presents this kind of *distance* or *play* between the two states attributable to the First principle, as when Plotinus writes: "nor will its activity and its life, as we may call it, be referred to its, in a manner of speaking, substance [ἡ οἷον οὐσία], but it is something like substance is with and, so to put it, originates with its activity and it itself makes itself from both […]." (7, 52–53) Of *Allogenes*' self-generated First principle, called "nonsubstantial substance" or "non-being existence" (47, 34; 48, 26–27; 65, 33), one could find an echo in the Plotinian reflecive exercise whose object is a *pre-substantial* or *sub-substantial* activity of the First principle, master of its own substance: "Nor should we be afraid to assume that the first activity is without substance, but posit this very fact as his, so to speak, existence." (39 [VI 8], 20, 9–11).

Is Plotinus here offering us another indication that he is familiar with the above cited passage from the *Allogenes*? It is difficult to dismiss this hypothesis, especially when we consider the discomfort he would have felt had he been with a person who considered himself as a member of the 'chosen' and therefore considered himself to be superior not only to other men, but the stars and even the Intellect itself.

IV. The Ascent of the Soul in Association with the Intellect in 38 (VI 7), 36: A Radical or a Relative Novelty?

The passages we have thus far examined can be interpreted in either a maximalist or a minimalist fashion.

According to the maximalist interpretation, we might claim that the Plotinian conception of the reascent of the soul evolved over time, and although Plotinus initially viewed the ascent of the soul as a solitary process involving only the soul itself, to a point where he came to perceive the proximity of this position to that of the Gnostics and its consequences on his system as a whole. These consequences, such as the elevation of human souls over the world soul and the astral bodies, and over the

Intellect itself, all of which are in fact superior to the individual soul, led him to correct his doctrine. He corrected it in such a way as to show, firstly, that the ascent of the soul *in fact depended on the ascent of the Intellect itself* (and it therefore remained subordinate),[38] and secondly, that it did not imply an upsetting of the order of realities by allowing the soul to usurp the position of the stars, thereby undermining the structure of the entire cosmos. Plotinus was unwilling to announce, with trumpets blaring, that he was abandoning his earlier conception, that he had erred or that the phrase "μόνος πρὸς μόνον" should henceforth imply the participation of the Intellect. Nevertheless, the modified description of the ascent of the soul in 38 (VI 7), 36, frees Plotinus from the threat of being associated with the Gnostics and their errors.

According to the minimalist interpretation, Plotinus always took the role of the Intellect in the reascent of into account, and also already in Treatise 9 insisted on its indispensable mediation through the entire process (see note 11). The statement found in 38 (VI 7), 36 would then be understood to be a mere reiteration of the long held thought that the Intellect accompanied the soul on its pilgrimage. We would be dealing here then with a *shift of emphasis* in Blumenthal's sense of the term, rather than with some kind of doctrinal evolution.

It is hard to determine which of these interpretations is correct. Indeed, short of an explicit denial from Plotinus, we cannot prove that the description in 38 (VI 7) exists in order *to correct the earlier point of view* and that, therefore, that the minimalist interpretation is inadequate. Nevertheless, one cannot see how the visible change, whether it is a definitive doctrinal modification or only a difference in emphasis, could otherwise be explained than with reference with Plotinus' critique of Gnosticism, which targets precisely this point pertaining to the reascent of the soul and which is inserted directly between the two main discussions concerning the unification with the divine in the Plotinian corpus. If it is not a case of doctrinal evolution, we might describe it as a selective development and, even, of a motivated selective development. But first the technical distinction between an evolution and a development must be established.

By *evolution*, we should understand the transformations which, over time, find their way into an author's work due to the fact that this

[38] Before treatise 38, I find no mention of an eventual ascent or of an eventual movement of the Intellect towards the One, other than in Treatise 32 (V 5), 8, 16–19, which is closely linked to the Gnostic refutation of Treatise 33.

author has abandoned, or even renounced, previously held conceptions. By *development*, we should understand the shifts and reframings of an author's thoughts, the selective changes it might undergo, in response to external circumstances, and the need to react to precise attacks, thereby emphasising this or that doctrinal point, lending it a new force. The change implied by the notion of *evolution* can go as far as a complete reversal of one's thought, whereas the notion of *development* implies at least the relative preservation of the initial presuppositions, all the while allowing for certain reorientations or readjustments. Hence, between a total evolution and a *superficial change* of no real consequence, there is room for a selective development that represents a new perspective.

The second description of the reascent of the soul in 38 (VI 7) could possibly be an evolution and represent, at the very least, a definitive *shift of emphasis*. Moreover, it is not the only such shift in Plotinus, as we earlier tried to show[39] with respect to [the concept of] evil. Indeed, Treatise 51 (I 8) expounds a theory according to which sensible matter is the universal cause of evil, whether it be psychic or physical, *including that of the weakness of the soul itself*. It seems that this accentuation, nearly unparalleled elsewhere in the work of Plotinus, is a consequence of his fierce opposition to the Gnostics in Treatise 33 (II 9) and this need to entirely exonerate the soul of all responsibility with respect to the appearance of evil, in deliberate contrast with the Gnostic cosmogony, which renders the divinities, and especially the Soul (Sophia), responsible for evil. In the case of the ascent of the soul, as in that of the reality of evil, Plotinus' amended teaching precludes all possible confusion of his teachings with those of the Gnostics.

The doctrinal positions which Plotinus assumes over the course of his writings are not always identical. They instead reflect his confrontations with a multitude of issues over the course of a roughly 25 year teaching career that spans for (with the earliest teachings taking place in 246, at the latest, or maybe even in 244 or 245, to end abruptly in 269). This career was marked by several decisive events and a great many quarrels, among which the battle with the Gnostics certainly takes precedence, for it was without a doubt the most threatening, and we cannot precisely determine its duration. It is clear, however, that this conflict culminated in Treatise 33, which was written sometime between the years 263 and 268, while Porphyry was by his side, that the pace of events continued

[39] See Study 3.

to accelerate (circumstances are troubling, since some of those near him have fallen under the spell of the rival doctrine and are defecting …), and that the demise of the 'school'—still unbeknownst to all—was in fact very near (269). Turning our attention to those key years (263–268) and to the debates at that time makes it possible to unite various theses whose differences might otherwise be overlooked as insignificant.

We are therefore compelled to recognize, at the very least, the existence of selective, but significant, developments within Plotinus' thought, which might be considered as traces of an evolution. Prudence, however, prevents us here from speaking of evolution pure and simple.

STUDY FIVE

A NEW TYPE OF CAUSALITY: PLOTINIAN CONTEMPLATIVE DEMIURGY

> *And my act of contemplation makes what it contemplates, as the geometers draw their figures while they contemplate.*
>
> (Enn. *30 [III 8], 4, 7–9)*

The integration of *praxis* and *poiesis* into *theoria* is thought to be one of Plotinus' most provocative innovations. Even the stalwart Bréhier was unsure what to make of this doctrine which assimilated *doing* to *pure thinking*. Thus he spoke of "one of the most violent paradoxes ever produced by philosophy."[1] Nonetheless, this paradox is the inevitable consequence, though undoubtedly extreme, of a new type of causality introduced by Plotinus, which holds that things naturally flow from one to another in a continuous flux, with a spontaneous creativity flawlessly linking the realities among themselves. For Plotinus, as noted Dodds, "causation is not an event: it is a relationship of timeless dependence by which the intelligible world is sustained in eternal being, the sensible in a perpetual becoming comparable to the 'continuous creation' in which some astronomers now believe".[2] This is why generation, for Plotinus, can neither be assimilated to mythical or religious creationism, nor to Platonic demiurgy, at least if this demiurgy is to be understood literally.

The theory of the two acts in its own way implies this as well, for according to it, one act always *constitutes* the very being of that which *acts* or *actualizes*, while the other consists in its *effect* or more precisely its *effectuation*, the reality which follows being distinct, on the one hand, from that which precedes it, yet at the same time being similar to it.[3]

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[1] Plotin. *Ennéades*, vol. III, Paris, Belles Lettres, 1925, p. 150: "un des paradoxes les plus violents qu'ait jamais produit la philosophie".

[2] E.R. Dodds, "Tradition and Personal Achievement in the Philosophy of Plotinus", *op. cit*. (Study 2, note 3).

[3] On this theory of the two acts, see my *La métaphysique de Plotin*, *op. cit*. (Study 1, note 7), p. 61 ff.

And as this continuous series of acts is not the product of chance, but a natural or, better yet, rational production (though it is not the product of a plan subsisting outside of it and to which it must conform), it is not distinguishable in any way from the contemplation which drives it and enlivens it at every moment. This being so, what *does* is simultaneously that which *contemplates* intelligently, nature being nothing but this glistening stream of intelligence. Or, to again quote Bréhier, everywhere and at all levels, "contemplation is at the same time production."[4] This then, as Dodds says, is Plotinus' *audacity*: he does not conceive of generation as a degraded form of contemplation—a notion already encountered in Greek thought—,[5] but instead extends this *active-productive-contemplation* to the entire cosmos.

There is likely, however, a deeper motive for this audacity. What might have urged Plotinus to at least *seemingly* contradict Plato who, as we recall, had depicted a Demiurge who simultaneously reflected on, calculated and erected according to a pre-existing model (*Timæus* 30b–c; 33a–b; 34a–b; 37 c–d; 39 e)? We say seemingly in light of the fact that Plotinus, who considered himself to be essentially an interpreter of Plato, never overtly opposed the master on any important points,[6] even though he admitted that certain Platonic statements sometimes needed to be harmonized with one another or were not yet fully developed.[7] However, the opposition appears to be categorical, even literal, between the Platonic statement according to which the Demiurge proceeds through reasoning (λογισμὸς θεοῦ *Timæus* 34a8; compare 30b1: λογισάμενος and b4:

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[4] *Op. cit.* (note 1), p. 151.

[5] We might offer Seneca as an example, who, from an anthropological perspective, already associated the two: "Nature, however, intended me to do both, to practise both contemplation and action: and I do both, because even contemplation is not devoid of action." (*De Otio*, V 8, in *Minor Dialogues, Together with the Dialogue on Clemency*, A. Stewart [transl.], London, Bell, 1889, p. 246)

[6] This assertion is contrary to what J.M. Rist, for example, claimed in *Plotinus. The Road to Reality* (chap. 13, "The Originality of Plotinus", Cambridge, Cambridge U. Press, 1977), especially pp. 183–187, where he examines particular doctrinal points: first in the metaphor [1 (I 6), 9, 13] of work being carried out on one's own statue, as opposed to, in Plato, work being carried out on the soul of the loved one (*Phædrus* 252d7); second, the critique of symmetry in Treatise 1 (I 6) and Plotinus' general attitude towards art; and third, the opposition of the Beautiful and the Good in 32 (V 5), 12. An in-depth examination of these so-called oppositions, however, reveals on one hand a richer and more complex Platonic doctrine than that which is being suggested and, on the other hand, certain polemical strategies which underlie Plotinus' statements. See on this matter my commentary in *Plotin. Écrits*, (*op. cit.* [Introd., note 5]), vol. I 1, Introduction.

[7] Cf. 6 (IV 8), 1, 27 and 10 (V 1), 8.

Δια δὴ τὸν λογισμὸν τόνδε), and Plotinus' solemn declaration stating that the universe was not produced "as the result of any process of reasoning [οὐκ ἐκ λογισμοῦ γενομένου] […]." (47 [III 2], 3, 4). How might this declaration be interpreted?

Undoubtedly, for Plotinus, these are distinctions between the different types of reasoning, such as that which is simply a way of expressing or manifesting the intelligence at work in the eternal and stable generation of things, and that which serves as a pretext for the introduction of contingency, change, and even conflict in the world. It is only with this second type of reasoning that Plotinus in fact disagrees and not with the first—as long as it is correctly interpreted. The problem with the second type is real, however, precisely because an exegesis of the *Timaeus* did exist at Plotinus' time, which depicted Plato's reasoning demiurgy as a form of contingency, by emphasizing its arbitrary character. These exegetes were, of course, none other than the Gnostics who became so problematic for Plotinus that he was driven to open controversy with them in Treatise 33.

We may thus, surmise that it is this ever more acute conflict with the Gnostics which caused this latent disagreement, though purely terminological in the eyes of Plotinus, with Plato.[8]

Indeed, the ultimately anti-gnostic motive for this Plotinian position, presumably already brewing in previous treatises, manifests itself on several occasions in Treatise 33.

Hence in chapter 2, speaking of the soul which remains up above, Plotinus observed that it:

> remains itself untroubled, not managing body as a result of discursive thinking [ἐκ διανοίας], nor setting anything right, but ordering it with a wonderful power by its contemplation [or *vision*: θέᾳ] of that which is before it. The more it is directed to that contemplation, the fairer and more powerful it is. (2, 13–16)

In chapter 4 of Treatise 33, Plotinus revisits this difficulty found in Gnostic teachings, and remarks:

[8] D.J. O'Meara ("Gnosticism and the Making of the World in Plotinus", in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, *op. cit.* [note 25], pp. 365–378), has already drawn our attention to this possible role of the Gnostics in the Plotinian development, all the while attempting to limit its import: "these imperfections are the consequences for Plotinus of postulating a deliberating and calculating demiurge and *need* not have been intended by him to represent specifically a Gnostic demiurge." (p. 371)

> For what is the source of its making, if not what it saw in the intelligible world? But if it makes in remembrance of those intelligible realities, it has not declined at all, not even if it only has them dimly present in it. Does it not rather incline to the intelligible world, in order not to see dimly? For why, if it had any memory at all, did it not want to ascend there? For whatever advantage did it think [ἐλογίζετο] was going to result for it from making the universe? It is ridiculous to suppose that it did so in order to be honoured; the people who suppose so are transferring to it what is true of the sculptors here below. Then again, if it made the world by discursive reasoning [διανοίᾳ] and its making was not in its nature, and its power was not a productive power, how could it have made this particular universe? (8–17)

In postulating that the generation is not based on *reflection* or *calculation*, but is rather naturally effectuated by an essentially productive power, Plotinus attacks the very essence of the Gnostic cosmogony, which is a series of accidental episodes (for example, see *Zostrianos* VIII.9.27–10.20). If the soul produced because it had fallen, the cause of this fall must be revealed. If this fall is eternal, the soul is forever fallen (a very undesirable state). If the fall was a temporal event, why should it have occurred when it did, and not at another time? And if it inclined and forgot the intelligible, how could it produce, etc.? For Plotinus, all these difficulties are tied to the Gnostic demiurgy, which misinterprets the true Platonic doctrine.

The issue is raised again in chapter 8, where Plotinus now observes that:

> To ask why Soul made the universe is like asking why there is a soul [*naturally producing, as we have just seen*] and why the Maker makes. First, it is the question of people who assume a beginning of that which always is [of course, the Gnostics]:[9] then they think that the cause of the making was a being who turned from one thing to another and changed. […] The image [the sensible world] has to exist, necessarily, not as the result of thought and contrivance [ἐκ διανοίας καὶ ἐπιτεχνήσεως]; the intelligible could not be the last, for it had to have a double activity, one in itself and one directed to something else. (8, 1–23)

[9] Undoubtedly, the Gnostics were not the only ones to defend such a thesis, but, in the eyes of Plotinus, they were the only defenders which mattered, as it was they who frequented his circle and successfully courted his pupils (cf. 33 [II 9], 10). In the Platonic tradition, only Plutarch of Chæronea, Atticus and his pupil, Harpocration, reading the *Timæus*, seemed to have drawn from it a generation of the cosmos in time. On all of this, see for example the clarification in *Der Platonismus in der Antike*, H. Dörrie–M. Baltes (Eds), Band 3, Bausteine 73–100, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, Frommann-Holzboog, 1993, p. 296.

Here again, the naturalness of the generating process, linked to the doctrine of the two acts, disarms from the start any contingency in the causality of a Demiurge who would be reflecting, passing from one state to the other, acting, in short, as an artisan does here below. We will note, moreover, that the beginning of chapter 8, where Plotinus attacks the ill advised Gnostic questions concerning the soul's productivity (the soul being according to him *naturally productive*) echoes his famous prosopopoeia of Nature, in 30 (III 8), 4, where he writes:

> And if anyone were to ask nature why it makes, if it cared to hear and answer the questioner it would say: "You ought not to ask, but to understand in silence, you, too, just as I am silent and not in the habit of talking. Understand what, then? That what comes into being is what I see in my silence, an object of contemplation which comes to be naturally, and that I, originating from this sort of contemplation have a contemplative nature [φιλοθεάμονα]. And my act of contemplation makes what it contemplates, as the geometers draw their figures while they contemplate." (1–9)

Here as well then, nature does not act *out of reason* (ἐκ λόγου, 30 [III 8], 3, 13 and 14).

Already, in chapter 6 of Treatise 33, in an essential development, Plotinus did not fail to identify the source of all these Gnostic misinterpretations, attributing them to misreadings of the *Timæus* in particular and of Plato in general:

> Generally speaking, some of these peoples' doctrines have been taken from Plato, but others, all the new ideas they have brought in to establish a philosophy of their own, are things they have found outside the truth. For the judgements too, and the rivers in Hades and the reincarnations come from Plato. And the making a plurality in the intelligible world, Being, and Intellect, and the Maker different from Intellect, and Soul, is taken from the words in the *Timaeus*: for Plato says, "The maker of this universe thought that it should contain all the forms that intelligence discerns contained in the Living Being that truly is." But they did not understand, and took it to mean that there is one mind which contains in it in repose all realities, and another mind different from it which contemplates them, and another which plans—but often they have soul as the maker instead of the planning mind—and they think that this is the maker according to Plato, being a long way from knowing who the maker is. And in general they falsify Plato's account of the manner of the making, and a great deal else, and degrade the great man's teachings as if they had understood the intelligible nature, but he and the other blessed philosophers had not. (6, 10–28)

Evidently, this passage calls for a lengthy commentary, but for brevity's sake, we will confine ourselves to only one point of interest. For Plotinus,

Being and Intelligence are but one entity,[10] which is at the same time the Demiurge,[11] whereas for some Gnostics, who unnecessarily multiply realities, three Intellects ought to be distinguished, the Intellect at rest (ἐν ἡσυχίᾳ), the contemplating Intellect (θεωροῦντα), and the reflecting Intellect (διανοούμενον) (this last being equivalent, according to them, to the Demiurge—though its demiurgical role would often be assumed by soul itself).[12] This theory of the triple Intellect introduces, in the eyes of Plotinus, just as many new problems to the Gnostic cosmogony as it does Intellects.[13]

An Invention of Contemplation?

We should like, if possible, to go beyond the simply noting the doctrine of contemplation's advantages and try to offer a broader picture of the world's construction. We should like to demonstrate that the theory of contemplation is, so to speak, a *superfluous* addition with respect to the already well elaborated Plotinian doctrine of emanation, which allows Plotinus to integrate more harmoniously the Platonic demiurgy. This demonstration is easy enough to carry out, as it requires little more than an analysis of some key terms employed by Plotinus.

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[10] Indeed the Intellect can be conceived as the sum of Ideas or of the intelligibles beings (5 [V 9], 5; 6, 1–10; 8, 1–4. 15–22; 9, 15–16; 6 [IV 8], 3, 10; 7 [V 4], 2, 10. 39–43; 9 [VI 9], 2, 21–26; 10 [V 1], 4, 5–7. 10–14. 21–28; 7, 28–32; 8, 9; 13 [III 9], 1, 15 ff.; 24 [V 6], 6, 21–23; 30 [III 8], 11, 28–29; 32 [V 5], 2, 1–14; 3, 1–4; 6, 3–4; 49 [V 3], 5, 21–28; 11, 1–4; 15, 21–23; 16, 28–32).

[11] The Intellect is the true Demiurge (5 [V 9], 3, 24–37; 10 [V 1], 8, 4–5), which, as "nomothete" (legislator), works without prior reflection, calculation and without effort, and whose demiurgic activity is relayed by the Soul in facing the world (5 [V 9], 5, 19 ff.; 6 (IV 8), 8, 11–16; 27 (IV 3), 10, 14–17; 28 (IV 4), 10; 12, 15–27; 30 [III 8], 2; 31 [V 8], 6–8; 33 (II 9), 2, 10 ff.; 4, 15; 6, 22–24; 8, 20 ff.; 11, 23–24; 18, 14–17; 38 (VI 7), 1; 40 [II 1], 5, 5; 47 (III 2), 3, 1–5; 52 [II 3], 18, 8–22).

[12] See *Exc. Theod.*, *op. cit.* (Study 2, note 11), 47, 1; Irenæus, *op. cit.* (Study 2, note 10), I 4, 5; 5, 6; *Tripartite Tractate, NH* I 5, *op. cit.* (Study 2, note 6), 90, 31 ff. On which, see E. Thomassen, "The Platonic and the Gnostic 'Demiurge'" in *Apocryphon Severini, Presented to Søren Giversen*, P. Bilde *et al.* (Eds), Aarhus, Aarhus U. Press, 1993, p. 239 ff.

[13] Chapter 1 of 33 already pointed out the difficulty created by the distinction of two Intellects: "for it would be ridiculous to distinguish things existing actually and potentially, and so multiply natures, in things which exist actually and are without matter. It is not even possible to do this in the things which come after these. One cannot conceive one intellect of some sort in a sort of repose and another in a kind of way in motion. What would the repose of Intellect be, and what its motion and 'going forth,' or what would be its inactivity, and what the work of the other intellect? Intellect is as it is, always the same, resting in a static activity." (24–30; cf. to what is already found in 5 [V 9], 5, 1 ff.)

Indeed, a close examination reveals that the new technical use of the terms θεωρία or θεωρεῖν is not to be found before Treatise 30, and that, barring error, it does not subsequently reappear with this sense after, except in 49 (V 3), 7, 30.[14]

It is in fact striking to see that the five first occurrences of the term θεωρία which precede Treatise 30 do not yet endorse the *productive* sense which the term will later bear. In 6 (IV 8), 7, 28, Plotinus lends the soul the capacity to "conside[r] what lies below it contemplatively", which he seemingly denies to Nature in 30 (III 8), whose contemplation, we are told there, goes neither above nor below, but remains within itself (4, 17–19), though it can *see* what is after itself. Treatise 6, in any case, reveals nothing about a productive form of contemplation. This same teaching appears in an even more straightforward manner in 19 (I 2), 6, 12–13, where Plotinus writes that "Wisdom [σοφία] and prudence [φρόνησις] consist in the contemplation of that which intellect contains […]." In 27 (IV 3), 4, 35, contemplation is even tritely opposed, in a man, to his practical activity. Finally, when (human) contemplation is twice mentioned in 28 (IV 4), 44, 1 and 17, it is, on both occasions, to indicate that it can serve as protection against the effects of magic: "Contemplation alone remains incapable of enchantment because no one who is self-directed is subject to enchantment: for he is one, and that which he contemplates is himself […]." (44, 1–3) Moreover, the same conclusion can be drawn as well regarding the verb θεωρεῖν, since all its uses prior to Treatise 30 hold to the standard definition. It is striking again to see that even in a treatise as chronologically close to Treatise 30 as Treatise 28, the use of this verb remains all together standard (cf. 1, 3. 7; 2, 2; 5, 8; 8, 1; 9, 16; 44, 3).

In the light of the preceding cases, the account in Treatise 30 therefore seems revolutionary, once the contrast is drawn between the banishment of reflection from within the Intellect or even the Soul, which indeed is not new (6 [IV 8], 8, 11–16; 10 [V 1], 11, 4–7; 27 [IV 3], 10, 14–17; 28 [IV 4], 6; 9–13), and the transformation of this non-reflection of the Intellect or of the Soul into an *effective-productive-contemplation*, which constitutes the novelty of Treatise 30.

Let us take as an example the important passage, discussed earlier,[15] found in 6 [IV 8], where Plotinus notes:

[14] This, as noted above, apart from the use of θέα in this sense in 33 (II 9), 2, 15.
[15] See Study 2, p. 67.

> For every soul has something of what is below, in the direction of the body, and of what is above, in the direction of Intellect. And the soul which is a whole and is the soul of the whole, by its part which is directed to body, maintains the beauty and order [κοσμεῖ] of the whole in effortless transcendence because it does not do so by calculating and considering, as we do, but by intellect, as art does not deliberate, [which belongs to the All ordering (ἐκ λογισμοῦ) what is inferior to it].
>
> (8, 11–16. Line 16, my translation.)

Here, the ordering of the world is indeed the *result* of the absence of reasoning in the soul, but this non-reasoning it not yet itself contemplation, and this contemplation is not yet itself production, which it will become only later. The same conclusion applies to Treatise 10 (V 1), 11, 4–7, where the absence of reasoning in the soul is mentioned: "And if soul sometimes reasons [λογίζεται] about the right and good and sometimes does not, there must be in us Intellect which does not reason discursively but always possesses the right, and there must be also the principle and cause and God of Intellect."

Everything changes in Treatise 30, from the point where natural contemplation becomes the immediate equivalent of a production. *Becoming* a productive force, contemplation remains speculative, as is naturally implied by the idea of reasoning (ἔστι δὲ θεωρία καὶ θεώρημα, λόγος γάρ 3, 18–19), all the while eliminating from itself the potentially contingent aspects (to which we will return). The change is all the more clear when the text is compared to that of Treatise 28, written shortly before, where the same opposition manifestly ignores the active-contemplative language of Treatise 30.

As we know, chapters 1 to 17 of Treatise 28 (IV 4) revolve around the question of memory,[16] regarding which Plotinus explains at length that it does not belong in the intelligible or even at the level of the soul, to the extent that these realities beyond remain in contact with each other and have no need to recall the contents they inherited: "If we did not see them themselves, it is by memory [that they are actual], but if we did see them, it is by that with which we also saw them there." (5, 2–3) Now, it is of course with memory, the resurgence of recollections, that reasoning and calculation can come into play; but if souls do not investigate or find themselves perplexed, "what could their *calculations* or *logical deductions*

[16] On memory, cf. J. Opsomer's recent study, "A Craftsman and his Handmaiden. Demiurgy According to Plotinus", in *Platons* Timaios *als Grundtext der Kosmologie in spätantike, mittelalter und Renaissance*, T. Leinkauf–C. Steel (Eds), Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2005, pp. 67–102.

or *discursive reasonings* be [λογισμοὶ … συλλογισμοὶ … διανοήσεις]?" (6, 12–13) Hence, little by little, a distinction of utmost importance is outlined by Plotinus between a *reasoning-recollecting* thought, and a thought which is always in possession of its contents, between διανοία or the λογισμός on one hand, and the φρόνησις on the other. As: "What calculation, then, can there be or counting or memory when intelligence [φρόνησις] is always present, active and ruling, ordering things in the same way?" (11, 11–13). Plotinus now extends this phenomenon to nature itself, which needs neither, like the administrator of the universe (= Demiurge), to calculate (11, 7. 9), except that, to speak more precisely, in the case of nature, intelligence becomes rather "an image of intelligence [ἴνδαλμα γὰρ φρονήσεως]" (13, 3), which makes of it a *trace* of the φρόνησις, that is something which yet remains above reasoning thought, but which acts *without knowing*. At this point, Plotinus offers us a decisive phrase: "For this reason, it [nature] does not know, but only makes [ὅθεν οὐδὲ οἶδε, μόνον δὲ ποιεῖ]" (13, 7–8), which is exactly what Treatise 30, dedicated to contemplation, will elaborate, save for the concept of active-productive-θεωρία. Recall that it is indeed in Treatise 30 that we learn that nature's contemplation is not rooted in reason (ἐκ λόγου 3, 13), and that we cannot question nature concerning its production—in the end, it knows nothing of its own activity, or has no better comprehension of it (σύνεσις) than someone who was sleeping would have (30 [III 8], 4, 22–25):

> "You ought not to ask, but to understand in silence, you, too, just as I am silent and not in the habit of talking. Understand what, then? That what comes into being is what I see in my silence, an object of contemplation which comes to be naturally, and that I, originating from this sort of contemplation have a contemplative nature [φιλοθεάμονα]."
>
> (30 [III 8], 4, 3–7)

Thus we find in 28 (IV 4), 13, 7–8, an essential statement linking a significant portion of Treatise 28—chapters 1 to 13—to the consideration of contemplative nature found in 30, a treatise which offers itself as a new elaboration of the discussion found in 28 as well as a gateway to the series of writings which constitute treatises 30 to 33.[17]

[17] We have had the opportunity on several occasions to show how Plotinus' anti-gnostic venture did not limit itself to the pseudo-extended treatise once seen by Harder ("Eine neue Schrift Plotins", *Hermes*, 71 (1936), pp. 1–10; reprinted in *Kleine Schriften*, Munich, Beck, 1960, pp. 303–313), and that what we are dealing with is not a *Großschrift* but rather a *Großzyklus* (Theiler, *Plotins Schriften*, Band III b, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 414, had already proposed to speak of a *cycle*), which would include at least treatises 27–29,

Let us consider one last point, particular to Treatise 30 and essential, it seems to me, for a clearer understanding of Treatise 33: nature's action conceived as calm and immutable, remaining above, all the while producing. (30 [III 8], 2, 15. 19. 30; 3, 2; 5, 11. 17; 6, 27). This steadfastness of Nature is fundamental in the *contemplative-productive* mode described in 33, as opposed to the production depicted by the Gnostics. Plotinus points out, for example, in Treatise 33, that Intellect "is as it is, always the same, resting in a static activity" (1, 29–30). However, as we discover in the ensuing text, what goes for Intellect goes for at least part of the soul:

> One must not, then, posit more beings than these, nor make superfluous distinctions in the realities of the intelligible world which the nature of these realities does not admit: we must lay down that there is one intellect, unchangeably the same, without any sort of *decline*, imitating the Father as far as is possible to it: and that one part of our soul is always directed to the intelligible realities, one to the things of this world, and one is in the middle between these; for since the soul is one nature in many powers, sometimes the whole of it is carried along with the best of itself and of real being, sometimes the worse part is dragged down and drags the middle with it; for it is not lawful for it to drag down the whole. This misfortune befalls it because it does not *remain* in the noblest, *where the soul remains which is not a part*—and at that stage we, too, are not a part of it—and grants to the whole of body to hold whatever it can hold from it, but remains itself untroubled, not managing body as a result of discursive thinking, nor setting anything right, but ordering it with a wonderful power by its contemplation of that which is before it. The more it is directed to that contemplation, the fairer and more powerful it is. It receives from there and gives to what comes after it, and is always illuminated as it illuminates.
>
> (33 [II 9], 2, 1–18)

The value of this text is that it links the *steadfastness* of Intellect to the *steadfastness* of the Soul, of which a part is not drawn below, and then this *steadfastness* to the contemplative and ordering power. But what *remains* here, in chapter 2, is precisely what, in chapter 4, will be reinterpreted and presented as the *non-inclination* of the soul, that is, as a thesis offered precisely to counter the Gnostic type of production:

> But if they are going to assert that the soul made the world when it had, so to speak, "*shed its wings*," this does not happen to the Soul of the All [as it remains above, as we have just seen]; but if they are going to say that it

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then 30 to 33, extending to 34, 38 and 39, having numerous echoes again in 47–48, and especially in 51, which finally completes the account in 33. See J.-M. Narbonne, "Les écrits de Plotin: genre littéraire et développement de l'œuvre", *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 64 (2008), pp. 627–640; and Studies 1 and 3 above.

> made the world as the result of a moral failure [*sphaleisan*], let them tell us the cause of the failure. But when did it fail? If it was from eternity, it abides in a state of failure according to their own account. If it began to fail, why did it not begin before? *But we say that the making act of the soul is not a declination but rather a non-declination*. But if it declined, it was obviously because it had forgotten the intelligible realities; but if it forgot them, how is it the craftsman of the world? For what is the source or its making, if not what it saw in the intelligible world? But if it makes in remembrance of those intelligible realities, it has not declined at all, not even if it only has them dimly present in it. Does it not rather incline to the intelligible world, in order not to see dimly? For why, if it had any *memory* at all, did it not want to ascend there? For whatever advantage did it think was going to result for it from making the universe? It is ridiculous to suppose that it did so in order to be honoured; the people who suppose so are transferring to it what is true of the sculptors here below. Then again, *if it made the world by discursive reasoning and its making was not in its nature*, and its power was not a productive power, how could it have made this particular universe? (4, 1–17)

There lies all the difference, for Plotinus: whether production is integral to one's nature, caused simply by contemplation or, having declined, whether one can only create from memory or can perhaps no longer create. Contemplation, as suggested above, keeps what could be described as the speculative and intellectual aspect of reflection, while removing from it any potential grounds for contingency or indeterminism. This is, moreover, what Plotinus claims himself in 47 (III 2), 3, when he explains that the basis of the difficulty is not the nature of reflection as such:

> And it is not proper for anyone to speak ill of even this universe […]; nor to blame the cause of its existence when, first of all, it exists of necessity and not as the result of any process of reasoning, but of a better nature naturally producing a likeness of itself; then, even if it had been a process of reasoning [λογισμὸς] which had produced it, there will be nothing to be ashamed of in its product […]. (1, 1–6)

Hence, it is not the process of reasoning *as such* which is inevitably reprehensible, but what is implied when it guides the act of production itself, namely, an act which is contingent and even *unnatural* in the case of the Gnostics (and eventually elsewhere), and eternal and already foreseen in the case of Plotinus, where the language pertaining to the reflection stands there only as guide in the explanation, διδασκαλίας καὶ τοῦ σαφοῦς χάριν, as Plotinus says of the apparently temporal 'entry' of the soul into the sensible world (27 [IV 3], 9, 14).

STUDY SIX

NEW REFLECTIONS ON GOD AS *CAUSA SUI* IN PLOTINUS AND ITS POSSIBLE GNOSTIC SOURCES[1]

Treatise 39 (VI 8) develops, over the course of several chapters, an argument relative to the self-causation of the First principle, which we encounter nowhere *before* Treatise 39, and which entirely vanishes *after* the said treatise. It is thus an exceptional thesis in Plotinus' oeuvre, which everything leads us to believe to be an *ad hoc* response to an objection which is itself *ad hoc*. This objection is reiterated by Plotinus in chapter 7, where we read:

> Unless some rash statement [τις τολμηρὸς λόγος] starting from a different way of thinking says that since [the nature of the Good] happens to be as it is [ὡς τυχοῦσα οὕτως ἔχειν, ὡς ἔχει], and does not have the mastery of what it is, and is what it is not from itself, it would not have freedom, and its doing or not doing what it is necessitated to do or not to do is not in its power. (7, 11–15)

In response to this 'rash statement', Plotinus asserts that, being in no way limited by its being and neither given to chance nor necessitated by other things (10, 34–35), the One produces, begets and causes itself (13, 55; 14, 41; 16, 29; 20, 2. 6. 25–27; 21, 7). Different hypotheses have been put forward as to the origin of this audacious and hostile (ἀντίτυπος, line 16) objection, which could conceal an attack on Plotinus' system that might be either 1) Epicurean, 2) Gnostic, 3) Christian, 4) Aristotelian (inspired more or less directly by Alexander of Aphrodisias) or 5) fictive (created by Plotinus himself for dialectical purposes) in origin.[2]

In our opinion, the audacious argument is Gnostic in origin, as it is certainly the partisans of this tendency who, ceaselessly insisting on the

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[1] We here take up again and develop the consequences of the suggestion which we briefly discussed in "Liberté divine chez Plotin et Jamblique (Traité 39 [VI 8] et *De mysteriis* III, 17–20)", in *Platonism and Forms of Intelligence*, J. Dillon–M.-L. Zovko (Eds), Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 2008, pp. 275–290 (especially pp. 289–290).

[2] A review of the different interpretations may be found in G. Leroux, *Plotin. Traité sur la liberté et la volonté de l'Un [Ennéade VI, 8 (39)]*, Paris, Vrin, 1990, and in L. Lavaud, "Traité 39 (VI 8)", in *Plotin. Traités 38–41*, Paris, Flammarion, 2007, pp. 175–326.

free will of one principle which arranges itself as it so desires, would most likely challenge Plotinus that his Principle is there *by chance* or because *it must necessarily be so*. We find in one particular text, attributed by Pseudo-Hippolytus to the Nassenians, that the god states that "I become what I wish",[3] a statement which finds echoes in some lines of Plotinus from 39 (cf. 13, 53–59; 15, 9–10). This recourse to the will of the First principle and the concept of its self-begetting, which emerges exceptionally in Treatise 39, is however amply attested in the larger Gnostic tradition beyond this single citation of Pseudo-Hippolytus. Here are several examples linked to the idea of self-begetting:[4]

1. *The Tripartite Tractate*: "It is in the proper sense that he begets himself as ineffable, since he alone is self-begotten, since he conceives of himself, and since he knows himself as he is." (*NH* I 5, *op. cit*. [note 121], 56, 1–6)
2. *The Gospel of the Egyptians*: "This great name of thine is upon me, O self-begotten Perfect one […]." (*NH* IV 2, 66, 22–23); "[O] Perfect one who art [self-]*be*gotten *(and) au*tonomous […]." (*NH* IV 2, 79, 5–6)[5]
3. *The Three Steles of Seth*: "We bless thee, non-being, existence which is before existences, first being which is before *beings* […]." (*NH* VII 5, 124, 25–29)[6]
4. *Ibid*.: "Thou hast commanded all these [to be saved] through thy word […] glory who is before him, Hidden One, blessed Senaon, [he who begat] himself […]." (126, 1–7)
5. *Zostrianos*: "The self-begotten Kalyptos pre-exists because he is an origin of the Autogenes, a god and a forefather, a cause of the Protophanes, a father of the parts that are his. As a divine father he is foreknown: but he is unknown, for he is a power and a father from himself." (*NH* VIII 1, 20, 4–14)[7]

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[3] *Refutation of all Heresies* (Study 2, note 13), V 2.

[4] On the question of self-generation, readers may also consult the important study of J. Whittaker, entitled "Self-Generating Principle in Second-Century Gnostic Systems", in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism* (*op. cit*., Study 4, note 25), vol. 1, pp. 176–193.

[5] A. Böhlig–F. Wisse (transl.), in *Nag Hammadi Studies*, vol. IV, J.M. Robinson (Ed.), Leiden, Brill, 1975, pp. 156–577, reprinted in *The Coptic Gnostic Library*, vol. II, J.M. Robinson (Ed.), Leiden, Brill, 2000.

[6] J.M. Robinson (transl.), in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, *op. cit*. (Study 2, note 6), p. 400.

[7] J.N. Sieber (transl.), in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, *op. cit*. (Study 2, note 6), p. 409.

6. *Ibid.*: "The inexpressible unknowable is the descendant of itself […]." (74, 20ff.)[8]
7. *Ibid.*: "Existence was inactivity, and knowledge of the *self-established* Kalyptos was ineffable." (*NH* VIII 1, *op. cit.* [note 7], 124, 17–19.)
8. *Allogenes*: "those who exist in association with the generation of those who truly exist. The self-begotten ones exist with the Triple-Male." (*NH* XI 3, *op. cit.* [note 47], 56, 10–15.)
9. *Ibid.*: "he did not need time nor did he partake of eternity. Rather of himself he is unfathomably unfathomable." (65, 22–27.)[9]
10. *Corpus hermeticum*: "The monad, because it is principle and root of all things, is in them all as root and principle. Without a principle there is nothing, and *a principle comes from nothing except itself* [ἀρχὴ δὲ ἐξ οὐδενὸς ἀλλ' ἐξ αὐτῆς] if it is the principle of other things." (IV 10, *op. cit.* [note 40], p. 17, modified)
11. *Eugnostos the Blessed*: "For he (the Lord) is the beginningless Forefather. He sees himself within himself, like a mirror, having appeared in his likeness as Self-Father, that is, Self-Begetter […]." (*NH* III 3, 75, 2–8.)[10]

The different formulae used by Plotinus in 39 (VI 8) to describe the self production of the One, apart from the syntagma of *causa sui* (αἴτιον ἑαυτοῦ, 14, 42),[11] therefore seem a natural extension of those Gnostic expressions,[12] even if we cannot be certain that all of these Gnostic formulations may be related directly back to the First Principle itself,

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[8] Based on the French translation, taken from *Écrits gnostiques*, *op. cit.* (note 44), p. 1298.

[9] The French translation runs as follows: "Il n'a pas besoin du temps, ni n'est issu de l'éternité, mais il est *issu de lui-même*, de sorte qu'on ne puisse aucunement en retrouver la trace." (*Écrits gnostiques*, *op. cit.* [Study 2, note 44], p. 1572)

[10] D.M. Parrott (transl.), in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, *op. cit.* (note 6), p. 227.

[11] The *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* does not list any other occurrence of the formula before Plotinus, but it is interesting to note that we find it, much later, in a context similar to that of Plotinus in the works of Constantine Stilbes (13th century): "And once again the father is without principle also from the point of view of time. For his being did not begin temporally, but he is beyond time, and he is without principle also on account of the fact that he does not possess any cause and that he is the cause of himself—for the Father comes not out of something—[Καὶ πάλιν ὁ Πατὴρ ἄναρχος καὶ κατὰ τὸν χρόνον· οὐ γὰρ ἤρξατο τὸ εἶναι χρονικῶς, ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ χρόνον ἐστίν, ἄναρχος καὶ κατὰ τὸ μὴ ἔχειν ἀρχήν τινα *καὶ αἴτιον ἑαυτοῦ—οὐ γὰρ ἔκ τινος ὁ Πατήρ*]". (*Professio religionis Christianorum*, lines 25–26)

[12] The references to the self generation of the principle drawn from the *Allogenes* and the *Zostrianos* are more instructive, because we know from Porphyry (*Vit. Pl.* 16) that these two texts were read by the circle of Plotinus in Rome.

except for at least the final two amongst them (numbers 10 and 11). But on the other hand, with Plotinus, they are uncommon and deployed *in reaction* to 'rash statements' which Plotinus will immediately denounce as inept.

The most plausible hypothesis is therefore that the Gnostic adversaries, certainly following upon the charges levelled in Treatise 33, retaliated in turn by attacking the central Plotinian theme of the procession of beings. We know that Plotinus had always insisted on the natural, eternal and necessary character of procession, and in Treatise 33 itself, we find him again criticizing the Gnostics regarding precisely this point:

> But each of necessity must give of its own to something else as well, or the Good will not be the Good, or the Intellect Intellect, or the soul this that it is, unless with the primal living some secondary life lives as long as the primal exists. Of necessity, then, all things must exist for ever in ordered dependence upon each other: those other than the First have come into being in the sense that they are derived from other, higher, principles. Things that are said to have come into being did not just come into being [at a particular moment] but always were and always will be in the process of becoming: nor will anything be dissolved except those things which have something to be dissolved into; that which has nothing into which it can be dissolved will not perish. If anyone says that it will be dissolved into matter, why should he not also say that matter will be dissolved? But if he is going to say that, what necessity was there, we shall reply, for it to come into being? But if they are going to assert that it was necessary for it to come into being as a consequence of the existence of higher principles, the necessity is there *now* as well. (33 [II 9], 3, 6–18)

But concerning the emanative process, the closely connected set of terms, *eternity*/*necessity*/*naturalness*, employed by Plotinus, does not exist as such in Gnosticism, where there instead frequently arises the problem of the *will* of the principle which, at any given moment, may decide to begin the generation of beings. It is for this reason that we can read, at the beginning of the *Tripartite Tractate* (*NH* I 5, 51, 6–7): "for he (the Father) existed when nothing else had yet come into existence beyond him alone". Compare to *Eugnostos* (*NH* V 3, 4–10): "He is imperishably blessed. He is called 'Father of the Universe'. Before anything is visible among those that are visible, the majesty and the authorities that are in him, he embraces the totalities of the totalities, and nothing embraces him", and to the *Authoritative Teaching* (*NH* VI 3, 25, 28–30.): "And before anything came into being, it was the Father alone who existed […]." The same teaching is also cited by Irenæus of Lyons, who speaks of a Gnostic Pro-principle which "existed in deep quiet and stillness through countless

ages", an abyss from which he "at one time decided [ἐννοηθῆναί ποτε] to emit from himself the Beginning of all things."[13] It is again mentioned by Pseudo-Hippolytus:

> There is, says (Valentinus), not anything at all begotten, but the Father is alone unbegotten, not subject to the condition of place, not (subject to the condition of) time, having no counsellor, (and) not being any other substance that could be realized according to the ordinary methods of perception. (The Father,) however, was solitary, subsisting, as they say, in a state of quietude, and Himself reposing in isolation within Himself. When, however, He became productive, *it seemed to Him expedient* [ἔδοξεν αὐτῷ ποτε] at one time to generate and lead forth the most beautiful and perfect (of those germs of existence) which He possessed within Himself.[14]

Another very remarkable text is to be found in the *Gospel of Truth*: "If he wishes, he manifests whomever he wishes, by giving him form and giving him a name, and he gives a name to him, and brings it about that those come into existence who, before they come into existence, are ignorant of him who fashioned them"; a little farther on we read "And the will is what the Father rests in, and is pleased with. Nothing happens without him, nor does anything happen without the will of the Father, but his will is unsearchable. His trace is the will […]."[15]

Other descriptions markedly similar to those found in the Plotinian treatise appear again in the *Tripartite Tractate* (*NH* I 5), already cited above, and to which we might now return. Plotinus, as we saw, mentions that some have criticized his principle for doing "that which it is compelled to do" (7, 15). And yet it is interesting to observe that the *Tripartite Tractate* already indicates this point, but precisely to conceal the First principle: "Neither will he remove himself from that by which he is, nor will anyone else force him to produce an end which he has not ever desired" (52, 15–24). Then, in the utterance reporting his production from himself, the text again invokes the power of his will:

> He has his Power, which is his will. Now, however, in silence he himself holds back, he who is the great one, who is the cause of bringing the Totalities into their eternal being. It is in the proper sense that he begets himself as ineffable, since he alone is self-begotten, since he conceives of himself, and since he knows himself as he is. (55, 34–56, 3)

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[13] *Against Heresies*, *op. cit*. (Study 2, note 10), vol. 1, I 1, 1. With respect to the will mentioned by Irenæus, see as well I 12, 1.

[14] *Refutation of all Heresies*, *op. cit*. (Study 2, note 13), VI 24.

[15] H.W. Attridge–G.W. MacRae (transl.), in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, *op. cit*. (Study 2, note 6), p. 27, 26ff. and 37, 16–26.

The same theme is found again a little further on:

> When their generations had been established, the one who is completely in control wished to lay hold of and to bring forth that which was deficient in the [..., and he brought] forth those [...] him. But since he is [as] he is, he is a spring, which is not diminished by the water which abundantly flows from it. (60, 3–16)

In this last text, we find already not only the idea of the gift without diminution, so central to Plotinian thought, but also the idea of a deficiency on the level of the intellect itself, a typically Gnostic notion which Plotinus particularly condemns. The "will" of the father is further reaffirmed on in the same treatise: "The aeons have brought themselves forth in accord with the third fruit *by the freedom of the will and by the wisdom* with which he favoured them for their thought." (74, 18–24)

In sum, it is clear that, with their insistence on the sovereign freedom of the divine, the Gnostics were particularly well placed to critique Plotinian "necessitarianism". The objection that they would have raised against the Plotinian position would presumably be in the same vein as that which Armstrong imagined hypothetically placed in the mouth of the Christians:

> 'Your Good just happens to be good and has to be good: it is like that by nature and can't help it; so it is not free but compelled to diffuse its goodness eternally by the necessity of its nature. But the God in whom we believe does just what he likes. He creates as and when he chooses by the act of his free and sovereign will'.[16]

Naturally, the Gnostic texts do not go so far as to imagine a God creating exactly *as* he wills—even though the formula of Pseudo-Hippolytus cited above, "I become what I wish", might tend towards this sense—, but they certainly support the idea of a God who creates *when* he wills. Thus, we can say that the suggestion of Armstrong was already going in the right direction. Nevertheless, we do not know of any controversies which might have raged between Plotinus and the Christians, such as was the case with the Gnostics (who are, on the other hand, also Christians). The passionate tone of Plotinus in Treatise 39 has but a single parallel in his entire corpus: the anti-gnostic Treatise 33. Therefore, from this point of view also, the two essays seem connected.[17] And again for

[16] "Two Views of Freedom: a Christian Objection in Plotinus, *Enneads* VI.8 [39] 7, 11–15?" *Studia Patristica*, XVII (1982), p. 401.

[17] The vocabulary linked to the τόλμα (impudence, effrontery) can be, it seems, from the pagan point of view, naturally associated with gnostico-Christian errors, as we see

this same reason, it seems that we should put aside the idea of a pure *Gedankenexperiment* pursued by Plotinus. His indignation is palpable throughout the course of the treatise and can hardly be simple rhetorical exercise.

That being the case, there remains two other possible candidates: the Epicureans and the Aristotelians. If we are to begin with the Epicurean hypothesis, we must first ask why such objectors should ever be considered? The suggestion, which apparently dates back to Creuzer, is based on the fact that through the course of the discussion of 39, and in fact from the utterance of τολμηρὸς λόγος, it is the question of chance which comes to the fore. The Plotinian principle would be *by chance* that which it is and therefore be in this manner constrained, and immediately in the following chapters of Treatise 39, it is mainly the threat of chance (τύχη), the fact of occurring by accident (τὸ αὐτόματον) or to becoming accidently (τὸ συνέβη), which Plotinus dismisses.[18] The idea of an objection mounted by a particularly stubborn materialist who subscribes to a system entirely based on chance, was initially suggested by F. Creuzer,[19]

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them reappear in Porphyry as he resorts to the analysis of fate fashioned from the teachings of both Origen (who turned from Hellenism to Christianity), and Ammonius Saccas (a Christian having turned to Hellenism), which he offers us in his *Contra Christianos*: "For Ammonius was a Christian brought up in a Christian education by his parents. Then, when he began to think and study philosophy, he immediately changed his way of life in accordance with the laws. But Origen, a Greek educated in Greek learning, went forward into barbarian foolishness [πρὸς τὸ βάρβαρον ἐξώκειλεν τόλμημα]" (*Porphyry against the Christians*, R. Berchman [transl.], Leiden, Brill, 2005, p. 140, fr. 39, 24–27 Harnack = *Hist. Eccl*. VI, XIX 7). On this subject, see among others P.-H. Poirier, "Juifs et Grecs: La médiation barbare", *Science et esprit*, 46 (1994), p. 296. On the matter of Porphyry's antichristian dispositions, we could also note that according to P.F. Beatrice ("A new Edition of Porphyry's Fragments Against the Christians", in ΣΟΦΙΗΣ ΜΑΙΗΤΟΡΕΣ. *"Chercheurs de sagesse": Hommage à Jean Pépin*, M.-O. Goulet-Cazé *et al*. [Eds], ["Études Augustiniennes" coll., "Antiquité" series, #131], Paris, Institut d'études augustiniennes, pp. 347–355), the *Contra Christianos* is not, in fact, to be distinguished from the *De philosophia ex oraculis*, and that this is not a work of old age, but is rather from the 270's, therefore appearing just after the years 263–268, during which Porphyry was with Plotinus in Rome, and that it, in reality, extends the scope of the Plotinian treatise: "There is, in fact, an evident development from Plotinus' anti-Gnostic polemic to Porphyry's anti-Christian criticism as found in the *Philosophy from Oracles*" (p. 355, translated).

[18] After 39 (VI 8), 7, 11–15, we come across a striking number of 34 occurrences of the word τύχη, 11 occurrences of τυνχάνειν, 1 occurrence of συντυχία, 4 occurrences of αὐτόματος, 33 occurrences of the substantivized expression (or employed in this sense) τὸ συνέβη, "it has become", and 15 occurrences of συμβαίνειν, all linked to the accidental becoming of the One!

[19] *Opera omnia*, *op. cit*. (note 59): "*Plotinus reprehendere Democritum, Epicureos Stratonemque Peripateticum, reliquos, qui a casu fortunaque omnia suspensa fecerant*" (vol. III,

and subsequently taken up again by Bouillet.[20] This argument, however, is deeply flawed. On the one hand, Plotinus is not criticized for refusing to settle on an explanation according to chance—that which an Epicurean would claim—, but for not having immediately rejected the threat of chance to a principle which through it might be rendered insufficiently powerful, free and self-directed. On the other hand, we possess no indication whatsoever concerning the adversaries or opponents of Plotinus' supposed devotion to Epicureanism. The hypothesis thus appears to be largely unsubstantiated, and seems to have been proposed for lack of anything better.

What then of the Alexandrian hypothesis? It is founded principally on a passage from the *De fato* where Alexander of Aphrodisias remarks: "In the case of the gods being such [as they are] will no longer depend on them … because being like this is present in their nature, and none of the things that are present in this way depends on oneself."[21] From this observation, it would be in effect technically possible, but only technically, to conclude that the gods *are not free*, because they are determined by their own being. But this is not what happens, because for Alexander, freedom characterizes our existence as contingent and imperfect beings: "For it is not possible to say that the virtues of men and of gods are the same."[22] From the point of view of freedom, the gods would seem therefore to find themselves paradoxically in an inferior situation. Nevertheless, this is in fact no slight against them, for it is freedom which here represents the inferior state, as it is the possibility of a choice of good or evil, which excludes the superior nature of the god:

> Acting rightly [κατορθοῦν] would not be applied to the gods *in the strict sense* [κυριῶς], but as equivalent to 'doing what is good', if those who have the power of acting rightly [κατορθοῦν] also have that of acting wrongly, but the divine cannot admit of wrong action. For it is on account of this

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p. 401, *ad loc*. p. 1354, 15). For Straton, the key passage is found in F. Wehrli, *Die Schule des Aristoteles*, vol. 5, § 35 (*apud* Plutarque, *Adversus Coloten* XIV 1115b3–6 [translated]): "And in the end, [Straton] says that the cosmos is not a Living thing, but that that which exists by nature follows chance. For he introduces as principle spontaneity, and then in this manner each physical event runs its chance."

[20] M.-N. Bouillet, *Les Ennéades de Plotin*, t. III, Paris, Hachette, 1861, p. 506, n. 1 (translated): "It was the doctrine of Straton the peripatetic, the Epicureans and other philosophers who reduced all to chance."

[21] Alexander of Aphrodisias, *On Fate*, in *Alexander of Aphrodisias. On Fate*, R.W. Sharples (transl.), London, Duckworth, 1983, 84 (Burns 204.13–204.15).

[22] *Ibid*., 92 (Burns 211.15).

> that we do not praise the gods, because they are superior to praise and to the right actions to which praises applies.[23]

Briefly, the god, who is beyond the contrary and contradictory powers proper to human freedom, is in this way beyond praise, which we address to those who have succeeded, but could have failed. We cannot therefore say the gods to be "free" unless, by reducing their infallible production of the good to a fallible human behaviour, we use the same term for both, a possibility which Alexander himself envisions but judges to be wholly inadequate:

> … unless someone wants simply to say that what is brought about by something in accordance with its own nature depends on it, introducing another meaning of 'what depends on us' besides that which is accepted and [in accordance with] our conception [of it], which we say is on account of our having the power for opposite [courses of] action.[24]

Considering this, it is difficult to imagine why one of the disciples of Alexander would have criticized the One of Plotinus for being forced through a lack of freedom, to dispense the good which it itself is. On the contrary, when Plotinus elaborates his concepts of freedom in response to those who accuse the One of acting through constraint, the freedom in question is justly summarized by the 'well-produced without faults' advocated by Alexander himself, and remains therefore homonymous with respect to the freedom from contingencies. It is this which Plotinus himself attests when he writes:

> But we see self-determination not as that Good's incidental attribute but itself by itself, by taking away the opposing factors from the self-determinations in other things; we might say this about it by transferring what is less from lesser things because of incapacity to find what we ought to say about it. (39 [VI 8], 8, 1–5)

In short, the true self-determination, which is not the freedom of contingencies, is that one which the God enjoys. Consequently, should we qualify the Principle of freedom? Yes and no. Yes, if we "claim that there is freedom when it does things or is active against its own nature" (7, 36–37); but in another sense, no, for being beyond all, even the most venerable attributes cannot be predicated to it: "'being in power' is to be rejected as later, as is 'self-determination'—for it already speaks of activity towards another" (8, 10).

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[23] *Ibid*., 87 (Burns 206.32–207.3).
[24] *Ibid*., 92 (Burns 211.30–212.1).

Treatise 39 is admittedly strongly influenced by the thought of Alexander of Aphrodisias,[25] but the hypothesis of an objector stemming from this tradition seems to us highly improbable. The potential disciples of Alexander could not criticize the Plotinian One for producing in a necessary manner and in accord with the good, since it is the position which they themselves defended. But there is a supplementary point. The reason for which the One is criticized, as we noted, is not only that it exists necessarily, but that it is what it is *by chance* (again another form of necessity). With this argument as well, it is difficult to see how the hypothetical members of this school could have been opposed to Plotinus, as they partake in this standpoint. Yet it is perhaps even more difficult to see how Plotinus could have wished to introduce the argument of chance simply to defend the so called "freedom" of his First principle, already criticized for its allegedly necessary character. In any case, the argument of chance is from the beginning closely linked to the foolhardy discourse that Plotinus describes and, a few lines later, this same reproach is repeated: "Just as well, it is incorrect to say [as our opponents do] that the Good exists by chance [ἐπεὶ καὶ τὸ κατὰ τύχην λέγειν αὐτὸ εἶναι οὐκ ὀρθόν]" (7, 32–33). The element of chance seems therefore to issue directly from the mouth of the objector.

On the whole, the hypothesis of a Gnostic adversary is that which is most solidly founded. With the Gnostics, we possess the probable motif, the general context and the vocabulary, namely, that which Plotinus borrows momentarily from his opponents. Furthermore, it is not because he *borrows* their vocabulary to defend himself that he takes up their thought. We are here faced with another example of the transfer or refocusing of the thought of Plotinus, induced by his opposition to Gnosticism. On either side, as we saw, it is possible to speak of the First Principle as that which *begets and wills itself*, while each time arriving at different results. The "will" of the Plotinian One wills in fact nothing, it is simply the remodelled expression of its infinite potency asserting itself as absolute necessity and eternity. The "will" of the Gnostic God is of another sort, since it accords to the divine, with regard to the sensible world, a sort of prior existence that is foreign to the Plotinian One. This divinity's production is a *specific event* stemming from a decision, which

[25] The point has already been well made by G. Leroux (*op. cit.* [note 2], pp. 17, 35 ff.); D.J. O'Meara ("The Freedom of the One", *Phronesis*, 37 (1992), pp. 343–349) and L. Lavaud ("Traité 39 (VI 8)", in *Plotin. Traités 38–41*, Paris, Flammarion, 2007, pp. 175–326).

it ultimately could not have made or at least have made later! Another text taken from hermetic literature again insists that: "God's activity is will [θέλησις], and his essence is to will all things to be. For what are god the father and the good but the being of all things and, of things that are no longer [οὐκέτι ὄντων], at least the very substance of their existence."[26] Certainly, the recourse to the vocabulary of chance to reply to Plotinus is new here, but then again, the Gnostics were well positioned to use it and could have easily exaggerated and retorted that contrary to that which occurs in their system, Plotinian emanation is totally subjected to necessity, having no more value than what is purely accidental. Indeed, what necessity is more undignified and shocking than that Epicurean type, occurring by chance, blindly and without reason? Since Plotinus amplifies the arbitrary nature of their cosmogony, certain Gnostics could have reasoned that they, for their part, could go one better concerning the fundamentally arbitrary nature of the presumed necessity of the One. The punctual will in their system, they might have claimed, is better than this impersonal necessity, incapable of acting on its own behalf and equivalent in fact to blind chance. After all, is it not Plotinus himself who introduces the spectre of Epicurus (the unique occurrence of the name in the whole corpus!) in the debate with the Gnostics, insisting, in treatise 33, on the rejection of the type of providence typical of their doctrine: "Epicurus, who abolishes providence, exhorts to pursue pleasure and its enjoyment, which is what is left; but this doctrine censures the lord of providence and providence itself still more crudely, and despises all the laws of this world and the virtue whose winning extends back through all time, and makes self-control here something to laugh at, that nothing noble may be seen existing here below, and abolishes self-control and righteousness which comes to birth with men's characters and is perfected by reason and training, and altogether everything by which a man could become nobly good" (33 [II 9], 15, 8–17; cf. 16, 14 *sq*.). Thus, what is accomplished by abolishing providence and indeed the lord of providence itself, aside from submitting oneself to a blind necessity, or in other words, definitely to chance?

Moreover, it is revealing to see the term ἐξουσία (*freedom* or *liberty*) by which Plotinus, in 33 (II 9) 11, 27–29, reproaches the Gnostics for the great liberty with which they speak of the production of things ("They say that this comes first, and another after that, but they speak quite

[26] *CH* X 2, *op. cit*. (Study 2, note 40), p. 30.

arbitrarily (ἀλλ' ὡς ἐπ' ἐξουσίας λέγοντες). And why does fire come first?"). It is this same term, which appears solely in treatises 33 (once) and treatise 39 (twice), that he employs in 39 against those who wish to render the One a slave to its own being: "but we could not say that the First is by chance and is not master of its own coming to be, because it has not come to be. And the remark that it does as it is (ὡς ἔχει ποιεῖ) is absurd if it involves a claim that there is *freedom* (ἐξουσίας) when it does things or is active against its own nature. Nor indeed does its possession of uniqueness take away from its independence, if it possesses uniqueness not because it is obstructed by something else but because it is this very thing and is, we may say, satisfied with itself and has nothing better than itself" (7, 34–41). Again, it seems that those whose model of the production of things he reproaches for being 'too free' (*ad libitum*) by calling them "epicureans" are those same ones who objected to the 'freedomless' necessity of the Plotinian One.

The link between the arguments of the two treatises becomes yet more evident when we closely examine the other occurrence of ἐξουσία, which, it seems, also echoes 33 (chap. 1). We might recall that, in effect, from the beginning of treatise 33, Plotinus refuses to allow the introduction of a distinction between existence *in potency* and existence *in act* at the level of the primary realities: "No one could find any principle simpler than the principle of all things which we have said to be as above described, or transcending it. For they [the Gnostics] will not assert that there is one principle which exists potentially and another which exists actually (τὴν μὲν δυνάμει, τὴν δὲ ἐνεργείᾳ); for it would be ridiculous to distinguish things existing actually and potentially, and so multiplying natures" (1, 22–25). Now, we might ask, what exactly do the objectors of 39 to merit such incriminations? The answer is given by Plotinus in a passage where the problematic of ἐξουσία is once again raised and where the Egyptian retorts that "it is for this reason that slavery is so ill spoken of, not where one has not the freedom (ἐξουσίαν) to go to the bad, but where one has not the freedom to go to one's own good but is led away to the good of another. But to speak of being enslaved to one's own nature is making two things, one which is enslaved and one to which it is enslaved. But how is a simple nature and single active actuality not free, when *it does not have one part potential and one part actual* (τὸ δυνάμει ἔχουσα ἄλλο, ἄλλο δὲ τὸ ἐνεργείᾳ)?" (39 [VI 8], 4, 20–26). We see clearly here that the possibility of a self-enslavement implies the introduction of a distinction between potency and act in the self, which is exactly that which Plotinus charges the Gnostics of resorting to in 33 and which he rejects

regarding his own principles in 39. There is again another statement in chapter 7 of the same treatise, where the opposition between potency and act is discussed in terms of the existence or the manner of being of the First and its act or its production as such: "and the remark that it does as it is (ὡς ἔχει ποιεῖ), is absurd" (36–37); "it cannot be active according to what it naturally is (οὐκ ἔχει τὸ ὡς πέφυκεν ἐνεργεῖν)" (50). We understand immediately that it was quite simple for the Gnostics to interpret the free will (an arbitrary will, according to Plotinus) of the Principle as a power whose every decision would be a new act, and to declare the Plotinian One to be *a contrario* subject to its own both fixed and arbitrary nature.

Doubtless no preserved writing can accurately confirm the origin of the famous τολμηρὸς λόγος. Based on the documentation available, however, it is in the Gnostic texts, it seems, that we find the most likely source of this objection, admittedly both subtle and speculative, suddenly revealed in Treatise 39.

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